Conversation is…

A sculpture shaped and bent to my will.

Fabric woven to protect and cloak with warmth.

An oral page for scribbling ideas, memories, and impressions.

A beam of light guiding travelers to new places.

Conversation is…

A beginning, an ending, a circle

A garden that seeds and grows new thoughts.

Born in air, lingering in air, and subsiding in air,

The invisible landscape of life that arrives in breath.

By Susan Bowsfield

University of Alberta

Conversations:

Implementing English Language Arts Curriculum in a Rural Senior High Setting

by

Susan Lynn Bowsfield

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education

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Dedication

For all who grow and learn through,

The invisible landscape of life that arrives in breath.

ABSTRACT

This case study used conversation as a methodology and Complexity Theory as a frame to examine the experiences of four rural English teachers implementing the new 2003 Alberta Senior High English Language Arts (SHELA) Program of Studies. The research questions addressed were: 1) What are the experiences of rural SHELA teachers in implementing a new Program of Studies? 2) To what extent can professional conversation shape personal understanding of curriculum for ELA teachers working in rural settings? 3) Can complexity theory inform the understanding of Professional Conversation Groups? The data chapters mirror the five general outcomes for SHELA. This case study found that professional conversations support learning, implementation and change through clarifying understanding and interpretation, questioning practice, sharing or generating ideas and solutions, validating or encouraging choices and changes, while creating new knowledge and building communities.

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- Val Paull, whose 'initial conversations' mentored my teaching in informal and formal ways in the early years, whose present conversations blend theory and practice, just as her textual conversations, with a true English teacher's red pen, improve my writing.
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- My participants, Anna, Erica and Rae, whose past, present and future conversations are the center of this research and an influence on my teaching. They are fellow wanderers on this unmapped journey to implementation of SHELA. Their conversations are signposts "by the path we have laid down" (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993, p. 214).
- All the teaching colleagues with whom I have had the pleasure to sit on committees, such as the curriculum review team, program validation team, regional English Council and Comprehension and Communication, to name just a few. It is these 'formal and professional' conversations that transform, rejuvenate, challenge and validate my practice.
- Teaching friends whose 'informal' conversations 'sustain' and fortify my daily practice.
- My school division for providing professional improvement leave and 'professionally directed conversation'.
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CHAPTER 1

Conversation: An Autobiographical Journey

Conversations in Teaching

The circular nature of conversation means it will always wind back to more conversation. What was missing this year for me, while on sabbatical, were conversations with teaching colleagues. The graduate seminars I was immersed in were exciting, interesting and provocative, but they tended to live in the mind, not the body. The conversations resonated within my body, making me yearn for ways to practice the new meaning and enhance the enriched spaces for thinking. Because of the absence of these conversations, I was excited to return to the classroom, because teaching is 'being' for me, and the conversations that flow from that being engage my mind, my body and my heart. Conversations of practical intent have always invigorated my practice. Until I returned to conversations, in that circular way they have of bringing me back, I had no idea what had been missing. Conversation has a way of surrounding me, welcoming me to the world of theory. But I have no outlet for the theory that lives in my mind, pushing to express itself in concrete ways…in ways to generate more conversation.

Inspiring Conversations: More Beginnings

Ironically, it was not a research conversation that provided the way into this writing. It was through another kind of conversation that I understood where

to start this thesis and why I have struggled to start writing about the importance of conversation in my life. While searching for a way into this 'conversation on the page', the text was flat and encased within my mind. It had no voice to express itself. The casual conversation between a mother and daughter sparked the realization that the beginning cannot begin without a beginning. This story could not be told until the research commenced, because until that time there was no meaning. This is one of the paradoxes of conversation. It can never be known ahead of time what will come from the conversation to create new conversations. So the story of research began with a poignant and timely reminder that conversation is the way I make sense of the world, as different questions and different people bring different conversations into my life.

Conversational Journeys

The autobiographical journey to my research is immersed in dialogue. When I was living and teaching in isolation, and starved for professional conversation, I began to search out conversation to sustain, rejuvenate and reshape my practice. My practice has always been guided by conversations that open and close, bend and shape, create and destroy, all the while directing and redirecting possibility. Realizing the importance of conversation bestows previously unheard of gifts on me; gifts that forever change the patterns, connections, and potential found in learning. Carson (1986) realizes that all research arises from "an experience of the world which directs our attention to the question in the first place. Autobiographical reflection is, therefore, an important

aspect of research in a conversational mode" (p. 76). Each 'type' of conversation I experience in the world contributes to the story and context that guides me to this particular time and place. The experience encourages reflection, shapes direction and moves the conversation forward. This writing is the experience of one teacher's journey to professional development and curriculum implementation through conversation. The second conversation, and the subject of this study, is to create opportunities for other teachers to engage in conversation in their professional growth.

Learning to Teach: Initial Conversations

As is often the case, 'we' do not recognize what is missing until somehow 'we' find it again. Conversation becomes most imperative for me when, after an absence of professional practical and theoretical conversation, I engage in one. As I slip into old patterns of quality shoptalk, the recognition that I have missed this energy flickers through my mind. For six years of teaching, from 1990 to 1996, I taught English Language Arts (ELA) in relative isolation. Somehow, as often happens in rural schools, my English minor became the most significant portion of my teaching assignment. The isolated school housed Kindergarten through Grade 9. It did not require specialists in any one subject, let alone several practicing together. I had one amazing friend/colleague who helped me survive the first six years of my teaching career in junior high. She was experienced, generous and talented. Her planning was impeccable and she always provided me with a copy of her grade eight ELA lessons, the only subject we both taught. She

helped me with discipline, lessons, planning, grammar, and, basically, everything. We spent hours talking shop, refining my practice, reshaping assignments, rehashing our failures, and reinterpreting our teaching. At times, we were in agreement; at others, we were distinctly opposed. Unofficially, she mentored me, but there was never any time to see and experience her practice. The rich and frequent shoptalk became the only available vehicle for mentoring. Unfortunately, I moved to a new school to teach senior high English (with only that minor in English) and she did not come with me. I needed to rebuild my own resources for professional conversation.

Loss of Conversation

The new school had two and a half senior high ELA specialists, but within the first year, the two experienced ELA teachers left. I was inexperienced with high school teaching and the other full-time ELA teacher was only a second year teacher. I had no unofficial mentor, so no experienced voice was available to bump ideas together. I needed to find a new avenue for professional inquiry to help me grow as a senior high teacher. I had lost conversation in a critical period of time and I needed it back!

Stolen Time for Conversations

I applied to sit on Alberta Learning's Curriculum Review team for English Language Arts (ELA), and it changed my whole perspective on teaching and professional development. There I found the conversation I had never even before

realized I was desperately missing. The curriculum review team, CRT, was an initial feedback committee supporting the drafting process of senior high English Language Arts for Alberta Learning. The committee met seven to ten times a year for two years. I learned about specific outcomes, general trends in ELA instructions, political battles, and other important issues and concepts. The meetings themselves were interesting and provocative, but still not enough. My true epiphanies came from informal conversations with these new, vibrant and exciting colleagues. This collection of excellent teachers had a wealth of knowledge to share about practice and theory. I found myself looking forward to lunch and coffee break because I could freely talk with my colleagues. Repeatedly, I became engaged in conversations about topics in ELA, like managing marking loads, assessment standards, engaging new texts, unit ideas, writing portfolios, alternative assessment, metacognition and representing as a new strand. Our shoptalk always renewed and revitalized my practice and I returned to my students enthusiastically bubbling over with new ideas. My understanding of why, what and how I was teaching was growing exponentially. This was the beginning of my search for sustainable professional conversations.

No Time for Conversation

Eventually, after I had returned to my classroom, the energy would diminish, because once again I was alone. The opportunities for conversation were sandwiched into five-minute breaks, thirty-five minute lunch hours and department budget meetings. By now, my teaching partners had become the type

of colleagues with whom authentic discussions and debates could occur, but there were no formal or informal structures in place to encourage conversation as a way to further our understanding of our subject or teaching methodologies. When we stole time for conversation, I always gained some new insight, but time was at a premium. I knew the value of conversation; but the administration and Central Office could not afford the luxury of providing time for collective planning, assessment concerns or other ELA issues, as that would cost money that our school simply did not have.

Initial Formal Conversations

Just as I was coming to realize my starvation for professional conversation, several ELA teachers from our division attended the English Language Arts Conference in May of 1999. Originally from two rival school boards, our respective schools rarely interacted on professional matters. During an accidental meeting at the conference, we began to bemoan the limited opportunities to discuss professional practice. Because of this conversation, we left the conference with a date for a meeting, determined to change the status quo and to establish collaborative conversations. This new avenue for conversation gained the title 'Regional English Council'. This group, comprised of any interested senior high English teachers in our division, met only twice a year to talk with our colleagues about practice, resources, assessment, censorship, et cetera. We never set an agenda, but somehow managed to spend hours discussing issues relevant to ELA teachers. I personally looked forward to the meetings,

where we often shared lesson plans, because not only did I walk away with theory and issues in the foreground, I left with something practical as well. Slowly, conversations were moving from personal, periodic and localized to more scheduled and formalized opportunities.

Professionally Directed Conversations

In recent years, formal professional development research has outlined the need for professional talk to be central to learning. "Teachers are being afforded time and space to talk about their work" (Clark, 2001, p. 4). As conversation gains credibility and value with administrational communities, teachers are encouraged to seek and sustain professional conversations that would shape their practice. After sitting on the Curriculum Review Team, I became a pilot teacher and so, for each of the three implementation years, I again had professional conversation. Conversation was still stolen at lunch and coffee break, but this time conversation was also built into the structure of meetings. We had specific work to do for Alberta Learning; but committee organizers realized the importance of our talk about teaching, which was driving us to become committed, outspoken advocates for the new program. Combining prescribed theoretical work with conversation about real practice in our classrooms built strong commitments. We shared our passions, new units, success stories and failures. As a committee, we felt invested in the program. The new Program of Studies was repeatedly described as having a "spirit to the document" by C. Windlinger, a member of the ELA piloting committee (personal communication, 2001). Every member had at least a full year

of meeting with colleagues, exploring the program, and adapting and creating lesson plans with other committed professionals. For those three years, I was extremely lucky to meet and talk with other professionals about implementation. The conversations never ended; they would carry through breaks, into lunch, and over to the next day or meeting. The investment of time permitted our practice to grow with our implementation of a new curriculum. Professionally, conversation also began to drive my desire to continue learning.

"Drive-by" Conversations

This 'type' of conversation occurs in the most unlikely of places and the most likely of places. It is quick and to the point, but often important and thought provoking. Whenever I walk away from an exchange, the conversation continues in my mind as I puzzle through the significance of ideas. It always surprises the participants with an unpolished jewel of an idea. One can occur in the hallways of school, the line at the grocery store, the gym during workouts, and even sometimes on the streets of Banff. My most significant "drive-by" conversation led to graduate school after I met my present advisor on the street. Her greeting included, "This is my husband, and when are you coming to do your Master's with us?" I walked away at the end of the five-minute conversation with a plan to email and talk further about potential graduate work. I had much to consider and a new direction for my career. In less than five minutes, on a public street, conversation changed my life.

Sustaining Conversations

Most rural teachers at the senior high level will only have one to three colleagues teaching in their same discipline, not to mention the fact that the classroom is often an autonomous space where there are no opportunities for neighborly interactions to take place. Repeatedly finding both informal and formal professional conversation led me on a journey to find sustainable conversation, and then back to university for a Master's degree. Unlike many rural teachers, I was extremely fortunate in implementing the new curriculum. The supportive, collaborative, questioning environment of a program validation team led me to ask questions about other English teachers' implementation experiences. Several questions followed. Do other teachers, administrators and/or Central Office value professional conversation? Why, in general, is teacher talk not valued as professional development? Why are some teachers unwilling to participate in professional development opportunities, quoting, "There is never anything useful"? What was it about my experience that engaged me in learning through conversation?

Where Conversations Lead

Eventually, these questions refined themselves into the purpose of this case study, which is to examine the experiences of rural senior high English teachers in their transition from the old Program of Studies to implementation of the new Alberta Senior High English Language Arts (SHELA) Program of Studies (Alberta Learning, 2003a). Specifically, the research questions are:

1) What are the experiences of rural Senior High English Language Arts teachers in implementing a new Program of Studies?
2) To what extent can professional conversation shape personal understanding of curriculum for English Language Arts teachers working in rural settings?
3) Can complexity theory inform the understanding of Professional Conversation Groups?

Using conversation as a methodology, supported by Carson (1986) and Feldman (1998, 1999), and with Complexity Theory as a frame, this case study focuses on four participants including myself engaged in conversations of experience with English language arts curriculum implementation in a rural setting. Two school divisions, which overlap jurisdictions within a forty-five minute proximity, were approached for participation. As a researcher/participant, I invited other rural senior high teachers to join in professional conversations about their experiences. The four participants were from three different schools and two divisions. Five one-hour conversations were held with the entire group and 'pre-' and 'post-' conversations were held between individual participants and myself as researcher/participant.

In analyzing and presenting the data here, I decided to use the framework of the five general outcomes for the senior high English Language Arts curriculum that we are responsible for implementing. Each of the five data chapters corresponds to one of general outcomes and a portion of each introduction, which captures key components for that general outcome, is

included as a frame for considering the data. I have also represented teachers as students of the curriculum they are responsible for implementing for students.

Biographies of Participants – Acquainting Conversations

Old Conversations—Anna

Anna and I have been colleagues for seven years. She has been teaching senior high ELA for eight and a half years. Her Bachelor of Education major is English. Anna's teaching experience is all in one school, and predominately in senior high ELA. She has also taught CALM, Integrated Occupations Program and a locally developed study skills course during the last six years. Previous to acquiring full-time teaching status, she worked as a teaching assistant in a modified classroom within the same division. Her initial teaching assignment was half-time English 10. She acquired this position after the semester started and a colleague became ill, requiring leave for the remainder of the semester. In the following year, her teaching assignment started as grade seven science and an integrated occupations program for one semester; however, at semester break, the same colleague became ill again, requiring a shift in Anna's teaching assignment to become predominately English. The next year, Anna also had an abrupt assignment change when the senior English teacher fell ill at the end of semester one. Anna moved into teaching English 30. For three years in a row, at the start of second semester, she was asked to change work assignments drastically, with only a day's notice. Anna was the least experienced of the four participants in my

study. Unlike many other rural teachers, only two years of her experience included teaching assignments outside of senior high or her specialization.

Anna came home to teach. She returned to the high school she had attended as a student and where she had also completed her student teaching. This experience came with mixed familiarity and distance, as well as varied formality and informality. Anna expressed the strangeness and incongruency of the experience in statements such as, "That was bizarre…I wouldn't have called any of those teachers by their first names!" (#1: 16). "I had known all of these people on so many different levels,…it was very nice because they were supportive of me, and they were happy that I was there, and then you have this automatic support group built in instead of coming in and nobody knows you from Adam" (#1: 16).

As a colleague of mine, she participated in our school-wide ELA piloting projects for grades 10 through 12. She had no direct access to the implementation committee; but through me, she was kept informed of curriculum issues, discussions and projects. As a pilot school, we had the advantage of three teachers all working on new curriculum simultaneously, and this led to many conversations about the process in which we were engaged. She believed she was still in the process of implementation and had reached "70 to 80%" (Anna Initial: 3). In her own words, "Do I have the new curriculum memorized? No. Have I implemented everything that's in there? No, but certainly at our school we are full speed ahead" (Anna Initial: 3). Seeing implementation of new curriculum as a process, Anna considered the school to be in a fortunate position due to our

piloting. She believed this provided "better access to the new things that were coming through, and better access as well to the opportunity to actually pilot" (Anna Initial: 4). The piloting experience allowed for gradual implementation rather than abruptly mandated implementation which followed exam changes. The following excerpt is Anna's description of the role ELA has in her students' lives.

> [L]ife is all about communicating. And if you can't communicate clearly, if you can't organize your thoughts in a way that [is] going to be understandable to whoever you're talking to, if you're not using terminology that is appropriate to the particular topic, then it's going to be pretty hard to let people know what you need, or what you want them to do, or what you expect from them, in personal relationships, as well as in the workplace environment. (Anna Initial: 3)

Anna also believed the new program was "not radically different, at least from my perspective" (Anna Initial: 7). She was of the opinion that the addition of visual literacy, and broadened text definitions made for more interesting text engagements for students. She felt that the new curriculum provided more direction to the new or inexperienced English teacher. To her, the Program of Studies was not prescriptive but flexible.

Acquaintance Conversations—Erica

Erica's teaching experience included three schools, three school divisions, and many subjects in Grades 7-12. With seventeen years of experience, she changed school divisions when her partner's employment required a transfer. Other than ELA, she had taught math, science, physical education, art and social studies. Before coming to teach at her present teaching position, she worked in

two rural Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools. Historically, she had taught split courses such as Alberta's former English 30 and 33. However, "[c]urrently high school is, is what I actually get to teach, and for the very first time I'm teaching just high school and not split courses" (#1: 2). She was excited to be able to concentrate her time and energy on one subject area, English. Her education was a Bachelor of Education with a major in English. In her words, "I realize[d] that the literature background is so important, and having taught outside of my subject area where I feel really uncomfortable because I don't have the background, I know the major is a huge part" (Erica Initial: 1).

Erica also came home to teach. After a twenty-year absence from the community she was raised in, she returned to teach in the high school she once attended as a student. She expressed her trepidation at returning to an established community of teachers, and at replacing a favourite teacher:

> I know. I grew up there. I went to school there. Half these teachers who are there were my teachers, which is a really strange thing to do, and I mean, that I left for 20 years, so I'm coming back, and I was terrified, I was taking Penny's place, she was my grade 10 teacher and I adored her. She was a really strong teacher. I almost didn't apply for the job 'cause I didn't think that I could do it. (#1: 11)

Erica felt her professional development for the new program was "hit and miss" (#1: 2), until she arrived in her present school division. Having had three maternity leaves in five years, she felt she was always gone when appropriate professional development for the new program was available. Having been employed with her present school division for three and a half years, Erica's comfort with the new program was growing. She piloted the grade 12 program for

ELA 30-1 last year and suggested that the experience gave her the confidence to apply for a lead teacher position in her school division's 'Comprehension and Communication' three-year project. She valued conversation as enhancing her practice, acknowledging it was missing from her past teaching experiences. Previously, Erica's teaching assignment was very unstable:

> [t]here was no one to talk with; none of us ever taught exactly the same thing, that was really detrimental to how I was able to think about what I was doing. There was no one to talk with, and since I've come here where there are actually three of us actually in high school, and seven or eight of us on staff altogether, and there's been larger groups. It's talking with people that has made a huge difference, a huge difference, I think it's invaluable. (Erica Initial: 5)

Besides reading and writing, Erica hoped her course would take students beyond their own personal world to allow them to see and hear new ideas, understandings, awarenesses and views. For her, the new program expanded the possible and removed the prescriptive text constraints. It reflected a flexibility that allowed for so many different classroom activities to be done in so many different ways and that felt liberating.

Brand New Conversations—Rae

Although physically within very close proximity to me, Rae was the most unfamiliar participant. Rae moved to Alberta over twenty years ago from Nova Scotia. Her Bachelor of Arts in English and her education degree were obtained out of province and included the study of different provincial curriculum. Upon moving to Alberta, she was a supply teacher in a large city school division for two

years, and then she decided she had better get serious about finding a job. The rest of Rae's teaching experience had been in her current community. Rae described being hired and thinking she was only staying for a year.

> So, yeah, I moved to Eastside and I had never heard of Eastside until I got called for an interview…like two days before school opened, oh, I had the job. I had the interview, and then the next day they said yes, but you start tomorrow. Okay!...where was Eastside again?…I was so happy they kept me. The teacher that was there the year before only stayed for a year, and I think there were just reasons for that, and I, so I thought, well, that's what they do with their English teachers, they keep them for a year, they fire them, and they wanted me to come back! (#5: 32)

Even though Rae's school housed Kindergarten through Grade 12, her predominant teaching assignments were in junior and senior high. Besides senior high ELA, she taught religion, health, integrated occupations program and social studies, as well as some elementary health and art.

Rae admitted a bias towards her subject matter when stating that ELA was the "most important…even if you just look at communication skills" (Rae Initial: 3). For her, knowledge and understanding of reading was critical and parallel to students' need to be able to communicate clearly. ELA was very practical and necessary for a student's future choices and positioning in the world.

Rae was the only senior high ELA teacher in her school and so she was required to teach splits on a regular basis. Most of her grade 10 classes had been a 10-1 and 10-2 combination. When she needed to create splits in grade 11 and 12, she tried to combine 20-2 and 30-2, which are Alberta's non-academic ELA courses. She was most frustrated by a 30-1 and a 30-2 combination, because the students required different preparation for different exit exams. The 30-1 ELA

course was perceived as a university entrance course and tended to move at a fast pace, whereas the ELA 30-2 course was perceived as less rigorous and demanding, although it met graduation requirements, and was accepted at many technical schools.

With no one to talk to in her school, Rae depended heavily on the marking of diploma exams for conversations about practice. She attended the January marking of diploma exams in order to gauge how on track her program was with the new exam structure. She was pleased with the new marking descriptors. She also used marking sessions to pick up ideas for responding to literature, film and media. Rae had to create her own opportunities for conversation outside of her school.

Rural Conversations

This study reflects one representation of the experiences of four rural senior high English Language Arts teachers in implementing a new Program of Studies. However, little time was spent during conversations on this rural element that had brought us together. Why we did not speak of our experiences as rural teachers framed in concrete ways may have come from various factors. Firstly, except for Rae, who was a supply teacher in a city for two years before coming to her present school, none of us had any city experience with which to compare. We only knew rural teaching; therefore, we struggled to see it as a different experience; it was simply our experience.

Secondly, three of us had teaching complements of at least two other subject specialists. This provided for some conversations about practice. Erica spoke of having one colleague with whom she worked very closely, while the third colleague maintained a professional distance. Anna and I had each other and, in the past, we had had a third teaching partner who sought conversation with us. At the time of the participant conversations, our third teaching partner preferred to teach without engaging in conversation. Both Anna and I struggled to accept this new personal preference for distance.

Rae differed from the other participants in that she was the sole senior high ELA teacher in her school. One other teacher shared the junior high teaching load with her, but Rae stated that they did not communicate much about their common subject, instructional practices or idea generation. Rather, their most common communication had been for student placement in senior high courses. Rae suggested that they have different styles, which may account for limited communication.

Conversations about sharing lead to speculation as to why some teachers are closed and unwilling to share or converse. Anna, Erica and myself all experienced sharing early in our careers. Erica was given boxes of ELA materials, resources and units by her predecessor, who was changing subject areas. Anna's teaching partner shared his closets of units, worksheets, and plans freely. He provided tips, advice and suggestions for her initial semester. As a starting place, it served its purpose in helping her to begin without feeling overwhelmed. Although she eventually imprinted her own choices into his material, or discarded

ideas that did not fit with her philosophy, she was grateful for a starting point. My experience included many shared materials and shared conversations. In a school with two junior high classes for each grade, I had the luxury of grade nine to myself and shared grade eight with my teaching partner. Initially, she planned for both of us at grade eight and assisted me with grade nine when I had questions. She shared some of her material for grade nine, although it had all been developed for another province.

We three saw value in providing others with starting points, recognizing that sharing, in a way, was letting go of the idea. No one person can copy, mirror or recreate another's ideas completely. Ideas are put out for sharing to be bounced around, twisted, turned, extracted and supplemented.

Embarking on Conversational Research: The Beginnings

Starting anything is always exciting, but starting something that is familiar yet strange, new yet old, and comfortable yet uncomfortable is particularly exciting. Setting the tape recorder to capture the first conversation brings anticipation. Would our conversation reveal itself as the powerful and important component of my teaching that I believe it to be?

Finding a comfortable space sitting on the floor is an attempt to create the illusion of relaxation, although the tension and stiffness of questions to be asked erodes the authentic nature I wish to capture, but a conversation must start somewhere. The contrived and planned questions designed to acquire common information from each participant stilts the conversation into a sense of falseness.

I don't want to talk too much, but I sense my conversation partner wondering why I am not holding up my end of the conversation. I try not to talk over her, and I'm careful of how the microphone will capture the sounds of the room. Our voices sound funny, as every word is articulated clearly, and every thought is considered for its political nature.

Then, somehow, the atmosphere changes and settles into comfort. The strange becomes familiar once again, as the words begin to flow naturally. Laughter is heard as we express our sense of strangeness and the ice melts as we begin a conversation about a subject for which we are both deeply passionate. The exchange becomes just that: a reciprocal exchange neither guided nor controlled. The questions are directed by the responses as they trigger new directions. Insights hang in the air. I still pose more questions, but now I feel free to answer and respond with my observations. The natural, authentic easiness rests in the body and the words flow without hesitation or self-consciousness. The microphone is almost forgotten as Anna's cat jumps into her lap for love and attention. I feel as though conversation has returned to my lap, like the cat who, starved for attention, has found his way home. This is the hypnotic power of conversation for me.

CHAPTER 2

Conversation as Methodology – Complexity as Frame

Framing the Conversation – A Case Study

This case study uses conversation as a methodology. The framework for the study is outlined here. A group of purposefully selected rural, high school English teachers were invited to come together for Professional Conversation. Four of the invited English Language Arts teachers elected to participate, with myself included as a researcher/participant. The research commenced on April 1, 2004 and data collection continued to July 6, 2004. During the three-month time-period, five one-hour conversations were held, where all participants were present. In addition to these five whole-group conversations, private 'pre-' and 'post-' open-ended interviews/conversations between each individual participant and myself were conducted.

Geographical Considerations

To facilitate participation, I selected a maximum geographical area of forty-five minutes drive. This practical guideline was used for identifying and selecting potential participants. The geographic constraints were chosen to encourage and enable participation in the research without undue hardship of time commitment and driving. I selected two school divisions that met the criteria for proximity, senior high schools and rural communities. These two school districts

overlap in one town where a Catholic and Public school board both have jurisdiction. The four participants came from three different schools.

I sought permission from each district's superintendent and their respective Central Offices to access teachers working in the previously mentioned school districts. Permission was granted in writing from both jurisdictions. Working through the two school divisions' Central Offices, I invited all senior high English teachers within the public school division to participate. This school division has two central comprehensive junior/senior high schools located in rural communities approximately thirty minutes apart. Both of these schools are collection points for smaller, outlying, feeder schools and serve a surrounding farming district. The schools' student populations range from 700 to 800 students. The approximate population of one community is 4250, while the other is 6500. As rural communities, they serve populations of upwards of 20,000. The size of the schools warrants a teaching complement of at least two and up to three specialists in each of the core subjects. Each school has at least two full-time Senior High English Language Arts teachers, with a third person completing the remaining partial timetable. Three of the conversation participants, including myself, came from that pool of participants.

Participants

In *Chapter 1: Conversations: An Autobiographical Journey*, I outlined individual biographies of participants and entitled the section 'Acquainting Conversations'. The section included acknowledging personal relationships,

relative teaching experiences, brief relationships with professional conversation and observations about each participant's beliefs, thoughts and philosophies regarding the role of ELA in students' lives. I also included the detailed biographical information about the participants' teaching experiences before introducing the methodology of the research, because it is important to hear the voices of the participants early in this textual conversation. The intent is to establish the importance of conversation and the relationships involved in those conversations.

A brief reminder of the established relationships follows. As a participant observer, employed by one of the school divisions included in my research, I was acquainted with two of my participants in at least a cursory way. I had worked with Anna for seven years, and consider her a friend. With a Bachelor of Education English major, she had been teaching senior high ELA for eight and a half years. The third participant, Erica, from the same division, was new to the division three and a half years ago and had only met the other participants at division meetings and professional development. Erica had seventeen years of experience in ELA, and a major in English. She had taught in two Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools previous to her present teaching position.

The geographical limitations and stipulated rural experience allowed for only two specific invitations to be sent out to the other school division. From those two invitations, only one, Rae, agreed to participate. Although Rae, the fourth and final participant, taught in the same community where Anna and I taught, I was unfamiliar with Rae until my research commenced. In fact, I had to

ask who the English teacher was at the other high school in town. As a result of growing up in the community where Rae had taught for twenty years, Anna was vaguely acquainted with Rae. Rae's duties were split between English, administration and career counseling. She had a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English and an After Degree in Education. The school where Rae taught was a Kindergarten to Grade 12 school with approximately 250 students in a separate school division.

Methodological Choices and Actions – The Case Study

Data Gathering

I met privately with each participant for initial conversations in early April, 2004. It was during these meetings that I explained the research purpose, their role in the research and went over the ethical obligations. I provided each participant with a copy of the information letter and asked that she sign an informed consent letter. Specifically, Erica and Anna's initial conversations were held on April 1 and Rae's on April 8. I used these initial conversations to build a personal relationship with each participant while simultaneously acquiring general background information. I had formed several possible questions to elicit information about individual backgrounds, which I used to guide our conversations but not to prescribe them. The initial private conversation questions are provided in Appendix A.

The themes, issues, questions and comments present in the initial interviews and the evolving conversations became the guiding conversation

starters. Selecting from emergent ideas, I opened each whole-group professional conversation with an open and broad question or statement, and then allowed the conversation to unfold in a rich, discursive space.

We met as a whole-group on five occasions for one hour. Our first conversation was held at four o'clock on Monday, April 19, 2004, in Anna's home. At this conversation, the participants agreed to continue meeting every two weeks on Mondays at four o'clock. They thought this time worked best as they could complete the school day without feeling too rushed, while meeting every two weeks would keep topics fresh and facilitate my personal deadline goal of completing data collection by the end of the school year. The second conversation date was May 1, 2004, at Anna's home. I had intended for all the conversations to occur outside of the school environment; however, Anna's subsequent move forced the third conversation on May 17, 2004, to relocate to the school conference room where Anna taught. The May 31, 2004, fourth conversation was also held at the school in the student services offices. For the last conversation, Rae volunteered her home. We also moved the date forward a week to Monday, June 7, 2004, because, as the school year was closing, time constraints were increasing for the participants.

Finally, a closing conversation was held privately with each participant. Rae's was held Tuesday, June 29, 2004, Anna's was Monday, July 5, 2004, and Erica's conversation was Wednesday, July 6, 2004. The closing conversation allowed for clarification of comments, issues and ideas relative to the individual participant as well as the group. It specifically allowed for an opportunity to

discuss issues that individuals tended to focus on or introduce repeatedly into the conversations.

Transcripts and transcription.

Transcription was an ongoing task occurring between conversations. I duplicated the conversation tapes for the purpose of securing the data in more than one location and to allow for transcription. In order to acquire deep familiarity with all transcripts, I listened to the conversations repeatedly, both at home and while driving my car. I hired a transcriber and required a standard confidentiality agreement to be signed. Although I elected to use a transcriber, the choice of listening to the tapes frequently and repeatedly encouraged the same level of familiarity a transcriber might acquire. As each transcript was completed, I listened to the tape while simultaneously reading the transcript, in order to verify it and record the attributions of the text in the transcript. I repeated the process of listening to the conversation and reading the transcripts one more time to verify the accuracy of the transcript. If, at a later date while reading a transcript, I encountered text that did not seem appropriate or was simply confusing, I always returned to the taped conversation. Whenever possible, transcriptions of the previous professional conversation were brought to the next, for verification by the participants.

Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained by providing pseudonyms for all participants, school districts, schools and towns. Further, persons mentioned casually in the conversations as colleagues,

facilitators, central office staff and persons in the field of ELA in Alberta were also provided with a pseudonym.

Transcripts were transcribed verbatim and include any repetitions, interjections and clarification points. Initially, only 'ums' were removed. However, in order to ease reading and clarity, circular statements, interjections, and repetitions I judged unnecessary to meaning were edited out of the excerpts included in the thesis.

Between each conversation, I continued my practice of listening to the tapes repeatedly. The verification of the group conversation transcripts included entering the speaker names for each individual utterance. With four women's voices participating in unstructured conversation, I thought that the transcriber could potentially make mistakes by attempting to keep the speakers straight. The necessity of reading the transcripts to insert speaker names also facilitated close reading and listening. Participants were asked to verify transcripts.

Data analysis and representation.

Transcripts were provided to me on disk and before I printed them for verification, I formatted the page to have a two-inch margin on the right side. This format allowed for easier note taking during analysis. Data analysis included reading transcripts and coding them first for topics, issues and concerns, then for themes within the broad categories. As the process continued, the data was revisited several times by means of reading and listening. During data analysis, I was continually considering representational choices for the data. I eventually settled on organizing the data around the five general outcomes for the Alberta

English Language Arts Program of Studies that all participants were implementing. This choice connected the experiences discussed directly to the outcomes of the new curriculum.

Tense use.

The issue of tense in a document of this nature is challenging; for example, participants often spoke of past, present, and future practices. Therefore, a series of rules were developed to guide my writing. Although the process of implementation did not end with the final research conversation, for clarity and consistency the following guidelines were followed:

1. Participant research conversations and analysis of specific conversations are written in the past tense.
2. As a research participant, I have two voices: participant and researcher.
    a. When I spoke as a participant, the past tense is used.
    b. As the researcher making general observations, referring to interpretations of data, or drawing conclusions, the present tense is used.
3. Academic research reference citations are given in the present tense.

Organizational structure: Teachers as students of new curriculum.

The new Alberta Senior High English Language Arts curriculum is divided into five general outcomes. These General Outcomes respectively include: students will listen, speak read, write, view and represent to 1) explore

thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences; 2) comprehend literature and other texts in oral, print, visual and multimedia forms, and respond personally, critically and creatively; 3) manage ideas and information; 4) create oral, print, visual and multimedia texts, and enhance the artistry of communication; and 5) respect, support and collaborate with others. In conversation with my participants, I have come to see the new curriculum as a viable construct for viewing the process of learning a new curriculum to teach to senior high students. We must first be students of the curriculum and in many ways must undergo a similar process to what we ask of our students for learning in the ELA classroom. To learn the new program, we become students of it. Teachers first explore new curriculum and form tentative understandings. They construct comparisons, identify differences and changes, and form opinions of strengths and weaknesses. As meaning grows, so does a teachers' ability to respond to and comprehend the new program. They must also manage the outcomes and establish structures to present curriculum to students. In planning and changing the program, teachers create units, plans, ideas, assignments and models. The experiences of implementation are further enhanced with access to a community of learners also engaged in the same process. The community supports learning and implementation through shared conversation that can be used for exploration, clarifying personal understanding, sharing ideas, idea generation, professional development, identifying solutions, validation of choices, impetus to make changes, removing insecurity, and the creation of new knowledge.

Each of the data chapters is therefore written and organized around the central tenants involved with each of the general outcomes. Where students are asked to explore, our relationships with exploring a new curriculum are represented and where students are asked to respond to text, our developing responses to the new curriculum are presented. This process carries on for each of the five general outcomes, creating the five data chapters. However, Chapter Five, which corresponds to General Outcome Three, differs slightly in presentation, because few to no extended examples of research and information management appear in the conversations. In order to maintain the adopted frame, I provide an extended living example of research or inquiry that a teacher may want to consider undertaking in relation to the new diploma exam structure.

Conversation as Methodology

Conversation

Feldman (1999) highlights "how conversations among teachers serves as a research methodology in which the sharing of knowledge and the growth of understanding occurs through meaning making processes" (p. 126). Carson (1986) argues that conversation is a methodology where participants forge new practice and thoughtful reflection. Clark (2001) suggests that conversation requires flexibility, intuition, exploration, listening, and silence. These qualities of good conversation contribute to professional autonomy and revive the enthusiasm for growth in practice. The research process used in this study provided reflective opportunities for participants to engage further in professional development,

personal practice, and curriculum implementation within the field of English Language Arts.

Professional development failures.

Many rural teachers teach several other subjects besides their specialty. They also often cross several divisions, particularly in smaller Kindergarten through Grade 12 schools. Larger, rural comprehensive schools, where several small communities may funnel students into the largest commercial center for the area, may have two to three specialists per mandatory subject area such as English, social studies and mathematics. Rural teachers are often limited with respect to resources, inservicing, support, and professional development during the implementation of a new curriculum. They lack specialist departments and professional learning communities, leaving them to figure a new program out on their own. To make matters worse for rural teachers, the current models of professional development often fail to meet the complex needs of teachers.

Clark (2001) and Fullan (2001) examine the reasons current professional development models fail. One of the key reasons for failure is a lack of ownership teachers may experience when program implementation or inservice opportunities are mandated from the outside. Large-scale curriculum changes, such as SHELA for Alberta, are typically mandated from an external source such as government or school divisions. Depending on the process, limited numbers of teachers may have some input into a new Program of Studies, as was the case for Alberta, but feasibility keeps the numbers of participants very low. When individuals are not engaged in framing the program they are expected to teach, they tend to either be

wary, selecting only those parts of the program that fit into personal philosophies, or they may completely reject the program. Therefore, implementation must engage the target population to encourage them to 'buy in'. If this is not successful, implementation is doomed to fail.

Contributing to the lack of ownership felt by teachers is the ethos of teacher as deficient, inadequate or broken. Teacher inservice programs can tend to treat teachers as lacking some significant skill or knowledge, and/or particular values or philosophies. If perceived as inefficient, broken, or ineffective, there is no room for accepting or engaging teachers' strengths or prior knowledge. These models of professional development contribute to the lack of ownership experienced by teachers and reduce their sense of professionalism. The reduction of teaching to skill sets neatly packaged in workshops invalidates teachers' knowledge that they are engaged in a very complex, dynamic system that cannot be packaged neatly. If teachers really are the ineffective cogs in the wheel of productive, efficient schools, then they simply need repairing, tuning or tweaking, so therefore, one model should fix all. In the name of efficiency, control, certainty and replication, standard models designed to suit all situations are popular. This absence of local context leaves the professional development plan unable to foresee and capitalize on strengths. In order to try to meet everyone's needs, inservice programs tend to meet no one's needs.

Lastly, many of the models are one-time, one-year attempts to address specific concerns. These quick-fixes try to eliminate the complex nature of teaching by providing formulas rather than taking time to explore the whole

context of the problem. Long-term solutions and change require vision, time, and commitment. These models, which typically view teachers as lacking in skill and professional judgment, are short-term, quick-fix models that lack local context and are doomed to failure (Clark, 2001; Fullan, 2001; Fullan & Hargeaves, 1992).

Professional growth is a continual process that current models simply cannot address; therefore, it is time to seek entirely new definitions of professional development. In contrast to these externally mandated models, Clark (1992) advocates self-directed professional development based on design principles that align with conversational Professional Inquiry Groups. These groups would be voluntary collections of teachers meeting regularly with at least one common element such as gender, specialty, experience, or position, et cetera. A group's key goal would be "to pose and pursue teaching problems together, and to provide intellectual and moral support to one another" (Clark, 2001, p. 6). However, because I am the only participant conducting inquiry into practice, with the intention of presenting the research in a public manner, I have elected to give the group the title of Professional Conversation Group. Opportunities like Clark suggests, to discuss theory and practice with other specialists, are valued and intrinsically satisfying but rare. As a researcher, I intended to prompt such conversations about the implementation process of SHELA.

Conversation as inquiry.

Carson (1986) suggests "the potential that conversation has as a mode of curriculum research will depend upon whether or not it is regarded merely as an effective technique for data or as a hermeneutical reflection with a practical

intent" (p. 81). Co-participants in a conversation desire some level of deeper understanding of the conversation itself. In searching for understanding, rich and vivid recollections are shared, examples of meaning are constructed, and references are interconnected. The researcher and the participant share personal perspectives that are woven into revised public understandings. The change in horizons created through the conversation forever alters the landscape that the researcher and participant tread. They seek to interpret their understanding of what has transpired and the cycle of interpretation continues. Through this dialectic process, what was felt, thought or said previously can be transformed, making the construction of meaning continual. Feldman (1999) stipulates that coming to understanding and interpretation does not imply that participants have common understanding or interpretation.

In conversation, ideas interact, bouncing and colliding, to create novel and unpredictable possibilities. They have a spirit of their own and lead participants in directions they never expected to go. Feldman (1999) notes that conversation appears to be externally driven, but yet internally owned by the participants. All conversation creates new meaning. It requires cooperation and collaboration as each response contributes to the shaping of the next response. When teachers consciously engage in research, they move toward understanding or explaining the world of teaching through conversation, and it becomes their framework or ideology for meaning.

Conversation as research methodology.

Carson (1986), Clark (2001), and Feldman (1998, 1999) all present the idea that conversation is a methodology, not just a method of data collection. Feldman (1999) uses Stenhouse's widely accepted "definition of research as systematic, critical inquiry made public (1975)" (p. 137) to argue that conversation is a methodology. The previous paragraphs explored conversation as a form of inquiry. Beyond inquiry, the collaborative process of seeking meaning from "talking, listening, reflection, and responding through questioning, anecdote-telling and other discourse genres, suggests that it is a critical process" (p. 138). An interpreter must move back and forth between the whole conversation and the individual snippets to guide interpretation. The whole can only be understood by understanding the individual bits and pieces. The hermeneutic interplay between the whole and the part reflects the immediate understanding and the larger understanding of the conversation in context, making conversation critical. Thirdly, research is systematic, when researchers and participants set goals or paths, make decisions or intend to seek understanding. They move systematically between the whole and the part. A Professional Inquiry Group meets the final requirement when it makes the inquiry public. It is important for a group to acknowledge that it is participating in research; otherwise it is impossible to be systematic. Feldman's (1995) argument positions conversation, as Carson (1986) also suggests, as hermeneutics with practical intent and purpose.

Specifying the exact intent of a conversation in advance is impossible. "Conversation exists for its own survival–and the conviviality of passing the time

engaged in making and opposing ideas among friends" (Florio-Ruane, 2001, p. 19). In this way, the practical intent is always to interpret meaning. Conversations may range from quickly uttered exchanges that spur thinking in new directions, to long and serious conversation carried over time. The continuum of conversation rests more on the nature of authenticity than length or purpose of a conversation. An informal, friendly conversation can meander into significant meaning and intention, while a conversation which is intended as serious and thought provoking, may fail to reach its objective. By its very nature, any conversation where the participants authentically engage in making meaning can produce a broad range of different meanings. To engage authentically requires trust that the process of conversation yields something previously unthought, unsaid or undone. Participants must value the conversation for its potential, and in valuing its potential, they must value the other participants with whom they are engaged.

"Good conversation feeds the spirit; it feels good" (Clark, 2001, p. 181). Not only does good conversation feed the spirit and rejuvenate us, its spirit leads us to new understandings we never dreamed we could or would have. Gadamer (1960/1975) believes

> We say that 'we' conduct conversation, but the more fundamental a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a fundamental conversation is never one that we want to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way in which one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own turnings and reaching its own conclusions, may well be conducted in some way, but the people conversing are far less the leaders than the ones led. No one knows what will 'come out' in a conversation. Understanding, or its failure, is like a process which

> happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it was a poor one. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language used in it bears its own truth within it, i.e. that it reveals something, which henceforth exists. (p. 345)

Gadamer's belief that conversation emerges from the participants with a 'spirit of its own' is, for me, the power of conversation as a methodology. Conversations are unpredictable, complex occurrences that are shaped and reshaped through the interaction. Accepting conversation as a methodological stance allows a researcher to explore the spirit of the subject under study. It allows the rich complexity to evolve rather than attempting to reduce the complexity, which inevitable destroys the spirit. In the process of making meaning, participants involve themselves in a non-linear process that feeds back into the conversation, creating meaning for all participants. No one individual controls and directs the conversation; rather, its collective interaction transcends any possible meanings one individual could intend on her or his own. The emergent nature of conversation allows it to explore the emergent nature of complex relationships like those of curriculum implementation, personal experience, and professional growth. Conversations are complex, just as Professional Inquiry Groups engaged in conversations are complex systems where the agents of system are embedded in more systems.

Complexity as a Frame for Thinking About Conversations

Complexity in Conversation Collectives

Complexity theory is employed in this research in order to understand further complex systems such as the interaction of mandated curriculum with personal implementation. The complex web of connections, both hidden and visible, between program implementation and professional growth is examined through the frame of complexity theory (Capra, 1996; Capra, 2002; Johnson, 2001; Maturana & Varella, 1998). Framing my thinking in complexity science as applied to education, the data in this study is examined for patterns of collectivity (Davis & Simmt, 2003; Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000) emerging from the conversation group.

Complexity Theory Overview

Complexity theory, a relative newcomer to science, is still evolving in definition and understanding. It rejects modernist sensibilities and mechanistic metaphors, tending instead to focus on interconnections and biological metaphors (Davis & Sumara, 1997; Capra, 1996). Its area of inquiry is now spanning physics, ecology, neurology, biology, social sciences and extends to include all living systems, which by definition must be a learning adaptable system (Capra, 1996, 2002; Johnson, 2001).

The analysis of a system may occur on a continuum of multiple levels from the cellular to the social. Maturana and Varela (1998) identify a unity as an act of distinction. It is the act of distinction, which distinguishes the unity from

the background, defining and making it possible. A unity may therefore exist beyond the single organism (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993); "Or stated otherwise, the 'cognizing organism' of their discussion need not be a single self-contained and visibly bounded unit" (Davis, 1996, p. 12). Each living unity is an adaptive learning system nested within other systems. These systems may include cells, organs, individuals, the classroom collective, the school, the community and the environment. Allowing for social systems, one such unity or system is the Professional Conversation Group established to examine the experience of rural teachers implementing new curriculum.

Complexity theory's central activity is self-organization and emergence (Doll, 2002; Capra 1996, 2002; Johnson, 2001; Maturana & Varela, 1998). This metaphysical view adopts the stance that "the universe is creative: it is in constant flux, moving from a *simple* complex order toward an ever-evolving more *complex* complex order" (Doll, 2002, p. 45, emphasis his). Seeing curriculum "as a complex and dynamic web of interactions evolving naturally into more varied interconnected forms" (Doll, 2002. p. 45) shapes the curriculum away from an end product to be delivered, and into a process to be explored and enacted. It is with this understanding that I explore the role of conversation in the implementation of new curriculum.

The first criteria for the emergence of complex systems focuses on spontaneous self-organization, which leads to transcendent collectivity. Although not fully understood, self-organization leads to functional collectives, which have "integrities and potentialities that are not represented by the individual agents"

(Davis, 2004, p. 141). Described as 'bottom-up' emergent behavior, the agents respond to local rules, other individual agents, and patterns. This 'boot-strapping' behavior utilizes the individual agents rather than some organizational 'top-down' control mechanism. Maturana and Varela (1998) call this boot strapping process 'autopoiesis' when referring to a living system that pulls "itself up by its own bootstraps and becomes distinct from its environment through its own dynamic, in such a way that both things are inseparable" (pp. 46-47). There is no leader, no externally imposed plan, and no specific goals imposed from the top. Spontaneous self-organization allows a unity to exceed the potentials inherent in individual components. Although spontaneous, several conditions have been identified as necessary. As the researcher, my goal is to attend to those conditions and prompt collective activity.

Perturbations are required for a system to self-organize. "A system self-organizes only when there is a perturbation, problem, or disturbance—when a system is unsettled and needs to resettle, to continue functioning" (Doll, 1993, p. 163). Whether the reorganization will result in redevelopment or destruction with regards to curriculum may depend on the ability to nurture the anomaly. Doll further suggests that:

> perturbations can work as a positive force when the atmosphere or frame in which they are perceived is comfortable enough that pressure is not produced to "succeed" quickly, when in this atmosphere the details of the anomaly can be studied (maybe even played with), and when time (as a developmental factor) is of sufficient duration to allow the new frame to emerge. (p. 166)

Within the structure of the Professional Conversation Group, several perturbations were introduced in the form of questions, problems or challenges.

The anomalies were nurtured over a three-month period where problems could be revisited. This slowing down to discuss implementation as a continuing process allowed a new frame to develop, at least for myself.

This paradigm shift recognizes that a system is greater than the sum of its parts. The properties of the system are not intrinsic properties of the parts; rather, they can only be understood in relation to the context of the whole (Capra, 1996). The systemic properties inherent at a system level emerge from relationships of parts and are not contained within particular agents. When a system is analyzed according to its parts, the systemic properties of the whole are destroyed. From quantum physics, it is known that parts are only patterns within inseparable webs of relationship. Shifting the level of analysis from the part to the whole shifts from an object of study to the study of relationships (Capra, 1996). The Professional Conversation Group delved into the relationships of curriculum, self, context, and environment.

A second important criterion is a system's adaptive nature. An adaptive system is a 'learning system', one "where learning is understood in terms of ongoing, recursive elaborative adaptations through which systems maintain their coherences within dynamic circumstances" (Davis, 2004, p. 151). For a system to be complex, it must continually assess, interpret and respond to its environment. This feedback or change continually shapes and reshapes the system, which in turn shapes and reshapes the environment. Neither organism is solely responsible; "rather, the two are engaged dialectically in a mutually specifying choreography where, all at once, each specifies the other" (Davis & Sumara, 1997, para. 42).

Believing in the nested nature of systems and continual change, complexivists are then capable of appreciating systems "simultaneously as, coherent unities, as composed of coherent unities and (possibly) as agents that comprise grander unities" (Davis, 2004, p. 152). The Professional Conversation Group is a system nested within several other systems, such as the participants' individual classes, school environments, or administrational teams, and moving outside of the individual participants, systems are the school districts and provincial system. Extensive segments of conversations centered on the influence of other systems on participants, such as district professional development and provincial exam structures.

For complexivists, intimate connections between biology and ecology exist. This interconnection informs their understanding of cognition, making 'knowing' a relational and contextual experience. Considering knowledge not as an object but as "action – or better yet, knowledge-as-(inter)action" (Davis & Sumara, 1997, para. 18) "recognizes that learning is social, relational and embodied" (Laidlaw, 2001, p. 18). Learning is a complex, fluid process that occurs in the 'inter' of life: the intermingling, interaction, "interstanding" (Fels, 2002, p. 7), intersection, intercourse, interchange, and interface. Through conversation with three other participants, I explored the 'inter' of implementing a new senior high English Language Arts program in rural Alberta.

Maturana and Varela's (1998) aphorism "All doing is knowing, and all knowing is doing" captures the circular connection between experience and action where "every act of knowing brings forth a world" (p. 26). Cognition within this

frame is "an '*effective action*', an action that will enable a living being to continue its existence in a definite environment as it brings forth its world" (pp. 29-30). This structural coupling with the environment brings forth a being's structural changes, creating its ontogeny. Each living being exists within an environment, and both the unity and the environment are operationally independent. Maturana and Varela (1998) characterize the relationships of unity and environment in the following way:

> [T]he perturbations of the environment do not determine what happens to the living being; rather it is the structure of the living being that determine what change occurs in it. This interaction is not instructive, for it does not determine what its effects are going to be… [T]he changes that result from the interaction between the living being and its environment are brought about by the disturbing agent but determined by the structure of the disturbed system. (pp. 95-96)

This is important to note in relation to the conversation group, because each participant's structure or ontogeny determined what she attended to, responded to, or adapted to in the conversations and in her experience of implementing a new program. Conversation is knowing and doing. Its direction is not prescribed; rather, it is proscriptive as long as it maintains the integrity of the system. As conversants within a system, "[w]e are always constrained by the path we have laid down, but there is no ultimate ground to prescribe the steps we take" (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993, p. 214). Within this research, each participant's ontogeny was shaped by personal experience, teaching experience, implementation process, and now by the conversations, themselves. Constraints of the path that brought each of us to the conversation group shaped our

contributions, but they could not dictate the steps we take. For this reason, implementing a new curriculum is complex, messy, unpredictable and uncontrollable. For me, conversation is one way to bring forth possibilities contributing to the shaping of new possibilities. Conversation is co-specification or 'co-emergence', where "we must see the organism and the environment as bound together in reciprocal specification and selection" (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993, p. 214). As a conversation evolves, it is not uni-directional; it weaves back into participants entwining the circularity. Davis (1996) suggests it is "appropriate to think of the interactions as a choreography in which one influences and is complicit in, but cannot determine, the other's actions" (p. 10). Environmental patterns trigger action when the structure of the individual attends to a particular pattern, but even these patterns do not *cause* action.

Conversation group structure.

The structure of the conversation group provides redundancy, diversity, neighbor interactions, decentralized control, and liberating constraints (Davis & Simmt, 2003; Johnson, 2001). Along with perturbations and ongoing learning behavior, the previously mentioned conditions are all necessary for the emergence of a learning collective. A learning collective engages in a project that far exceeds the potential of its individual parts. In structuring the Professional Conversation Group to discuss the implementation of SHELA in Alberta, the collective task of articulating individual experiences prompts the emergence of a conversational learning collective. The learning system then becomes a potential model of support for teachers in the process of change. Such an approach acknowledges the

critical role of local context in professional development, while creating supportive, voluntary, and inexpensive professional development. In order to facilitate the learning collective, I attended to the following five conditions initiated following Davis and Simmt's example (2003).

Prompting the collective.

Internal diversity is required for a collective to function in novel and innovative ways. It also contributes to the collective's ability to surpass individual potential. Each ELA teacher had her own personal style, experiences, skills, knowledge, strengths and weaknesses on which the collective capitalizes. These differences become the collective's source of intelligence (Johnson, 2001). Diversity is necessary as the system reaches outward to access possibility.

Redundancy enables coherence and interactivity between agents and is the complement to internal diversity. A Professional Conversation Group functioning as a learning community requires duplication, excesses and similarities in background and purpose in order to transform into a collective. As a collective of ELA teachers, we shared common interests in reading, writing and other issues related to our subject area specialty. However, this condition is often neglected, and simply understood to be present in a group assumed to express similarities. It is not a simple case of common language or experiences. Resonance, purpose and personal understandings must be available for interpretation in order for individuals to transform into a collective. A healthy, vigorous system requires both an ability to interrelate and a level of interchangeability in order to learn.

Redundancy is essential to learning and contributes to the strengthening of the system's internal interactive relationships.

Enabling constraints defined the parameters and purpose of our conversations. This condition outlined the rules of our engagement but did not define the potential and possible conversations that emerged. Constraints act to define our task with limitations and guidelines while not prescribing actions or interpretations. The constraints must be flexible, allowing for interpretation, yet parameters must define the space of the possible. For example, open conversations on any subject lack focus, are not systematic in nature and are unlikely to reveal interesting insight into the implementation of ELA. This type of conversation, although valuable in its own right, would not suit the purpose of research. Establishing these constraints within the conversation group requires ongoing negotiation and adjustment between rigidity, flexibility, and, at times, abandonment. The enabling constraints I enacted for the research group included time limits, private conversations, and five whole-group conversations to build a collective of learners. Besides these constraints of time and dynamics of conversation, there was the purpose of the research itself, which acted as a constraint. Desiring to explore the experiences of senior high ELA teachers during implementation of new curriculum constrained the conversation to issues relevant to those experiences. Within those experiences ranged possibilities that could not be predefined. It is important to define rules proscriptively at the local level, so neither redundancy nor diversity of interaction is privileged (Davis, Sumara &

Luce-Kapler, 2000). These constraints were revised as necessary throughout the research.

A key condition is neighboring interactions, where there is the sufficient density of ideas interacting with one another to create new meaning. "[I]f the focus is not on the display and interpretation of diverse and emergent ideas" (Davis & Simmt, 2003, p. 156), complex interaction is not likely to emerge. As the ideas interact, the collective's understanding and interpretation is enhanced. A quantity and quality of authentic interaction are required to bump ideas together (Johnson, 2001). During the colliding, subsuming and repelling, ideas are shaped and reshaped, interpreted and reinterpreted. The collective must be a safe space to share and risk interpretations. Each agent/participant shares a responsibility to be open to other ideas while simultaneously contributing ideas. It is important for the ideas to be conceptually available so that recursive elaboration is possible. Recording the conversation allows the consciousness to process new ideas without losing already presented ideas. Each participant had opportunities to read the transcripts of our conversations. One of my roles in this research was to "synthesize various experiential examples presented by individual teachers and then check out those understandings with the group" (Hollingsworth, 1994, p. 9). This encouraged revisiting, elaborating, modifying and discarding of ideas as the collisions reached a sustainable density.

Decentralized control is the creation of shared projects where all agents become learners. The Professional Conversation Group shared the important project of implementing curriculum. The possibilities, interpretations, and

understandings generated knowledge for all learners from this shared project and could not be completely scripted or pre-stated. The complex unity shared ideas, concepts, insights, and perceptions through conversations, creating an emerging knowledge of classroom practice that fluidly and continually adapted to new information. Knowledge is decentralized and no one agent is seen to be the sole authority of appropriateness and correctness of ideas (Davis & Simmt, 2003). Here, the researcher needs to be an active participant. As a participant observer, I needed to position myself in the collaborative conversation rather than attempt to lead or dominate the conversation. Dispersing control allowed for the investment, value and engagement of others and contributed to sustaining emergence (Johnson, 2001). No pacemaker or individual controlled or determined a conversation as it meandered along. For Gadamer (1960/1975), participants did not lead conversations; rather, conversation led the participants to new interpretations.

As a participant researcher, my goal was not to impose change but rather to explore change with the community I occasioned. I entered the research collaborations aware that my conversations would affect the community I involved myself with. The conversations may contribute to change in patterns of behavior. However, "it is the individuals in the collective that determine what will happen, and not even they or it know what that might be until it actually unfolds" (Davis & Sumara, 2001). It is impossible to know all the possibilities contained in the collaborative conversations even after a detailed exploration of them in a

thesis. The folding and weaving of ideas will continue to shape participants long after the completion of the research.

Fullan (2001) addresses the complex nature of learning organizations and the importance of addressing the relationships enfolded in them. Social systems and organizations, such as schools, require complex explorations and solutions. Conversations offer a way into the complexity where relationships are integral and central to change. Learning organizations are interconnected webs of nonlinear feedback loops. Teachers involved in the process of implementation are living in a web woven from the curriculum, their experiences, their interpretations, the school environment and many more systems, which feed into a teacher's environment. The environment, other organizations and social connections outside a system all contribute to nonlinear feedback loops that shape the system. The paradoxical relationship of stability and instability creates a tension in the systems. The tension between the desire for stability and certainty is pitted against the desire for novelty and innovation. If stability is allowed to overrun an organization, it is unable to adapt to new circumstances. However, if instability becomes the strongest attractor, then the system moves toward decentralization and becomes difficult to maintain. Fullan (2001, 2003) suggests that a learning school actively engages in relationships that prompt change and encourage learning from one another. Conversation among specialist teachers encourages agents in the organization of school to be learning agents, who are then capable of contributing in new ways to the web of a school.

CHAPTER 3

Conversations of Exploring New SHELA

> Students [teachers] engage in exploration to discover possibilities and to extend their awareness. Through exploration students [teachers] begin to formulate their thoughts and ideas, organize and make sense of their experiences, and acknowledge and express their feelings. Exploration enables students [teachers] to discover and understand what they think and who they are. It also helps them to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as language users and language learners. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 15)
>
> As students [teachers] become engaged in exploration, they express their preferences and interest, and they set personal goals for language growth. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 15)
>
> Through talk and conversation, students [teachers] make observations, ask questions, generate hypotheses, make predictions and form opinions. Often, students [teachers] discover what they think at the point of utterance. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 15)

Explorations Role in Learning

Exploration is essential to learning and envisioning the possible. Greene (1995) notes that when "a person chooses to view herself or himself in the midst of things, as beginner or learner or explorer, and has the imagination to envisage new things emerging, more and more begins to seem possible" (p. 22). Exploration is both the way in and the route to deeper understanding. This foundational component of learning is carefully articulated in General Outcome One, where students are to explore, thoughts, ideas feelings and experiences through listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing. However, this understanding of learning grounded in exploration is rarely applied to those

asked to implement a Program of Studies. In Sarason's (1990) sharp critique of educational reform, he observes "[i]t is virtually impossible to create and sustain over time conditions for productive learning for students when they do not exist for teachers" (p. 145). Therefore, I believe it is important for teachers to have opportunities to explore as learners the very document they are expected to implement. The program attempts to encourage students' exploration of language and ideas. I suggest that one way into a new curriculum is to venture into the experience first as a learner, not as a teacher. Darling-Hammond (1997) suggests that dual engagement as learners and teachers is important for effective professional development as it allows teachers to live in the tension and ambiguity of each role.

Overview of Program Changes

Having worked with the Alberta Learning Curriculum Review Team and the Program Validation Teams for five years, I have participated in multiple conversations, which have contributed to the shaping and reshaping of my impressions of and experiences with the new curriculum. Grossman (2001) suggests that, although rare in schools, the opportunity for participation in professional intellectual communities is important in establishing a community of learners in the classroom. The experience of sustained professional conversation during government committee work has contributed to my desire to explore what other teachers' experiences were with the new program. Simultaneously, it

established connections to individuals in close proximity to me in an effort to sustain an intellectual community.

In order to understand issues, which arose from conversations about the experience of implementation, it is important to examine briefly the origination of the curriculum, the previous (1982) curriculum and new curriculums for distinct differences and emphasis shifts. Walker, Ellefson, and Peters (2000) identify framing ideas for curriculum revisions and significant issues arising from the process. The new Program of Studies emerged from the Western Canadian Protocol Agreement, which was signed by the four Western provinces and two territories and created a document called The Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts, Kindergarten to Grade 12. Three frames surrounding the development of this protocol were the efficient use of resources such as textbooks, student-centered learning outcomes and technology. One of the key issues they identified is that of literature in a multi-textual universe, grade level specific outcomes, and performance standards. Within my research, the issue of the broadened definition of text and its relationship to literature was a key concern for my participants. Walker also notes the challenge of creating specific outcomes for specific grade levels which "honored a developmental theory of language in which growth is seen to be fluid, continuous, and recursive rather than being defined as some number of discrete and presumably, valid levels of achievement" (p. 63). Perhaps these issues formed part of the reason Alberta maintained the framework of the broad general outcomes but elected to maintain a streamed high school program.

The Alberta Senior High English Language Arts curriculum was phased in over a three-year period, beginning in 2001 with grade 10 and culminating in 2003 with grade 12. This curriculum was paired with the implementation of new diploma exam structures (Alberta Learning, 2002a). The program is outcomes based and includes several emphasis changes to the previous Program of Studies. For example, organizationally, the program moves from the language strands of reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing to integrated general outcomes, it emphasizes metacognitive activities to enhance learning, it adds representing as the companion strand to viewing, it broadens the definition of text considerably, and it includes a minimum text creation requirement to match minimum text study (Alberta Learning, 2003a, 2003b).

Since 1982, senior high English teachers in Alberta have been working with the same Program of Studies. Therefore, all my participants had been responsible for the same senior high curriculum for their entire careers. Without conversation, support and collaboration, this stability in the document may make changes very uncomfortable. This is not to say that teaching English has not evolved since 1982. For example, new texts were authorized in 1991 and a new novel list was issued in 1994. However, the changes in practice were slow and evolving, not mandated and abrupt.

Exploration is filled with tension, the known and unknown, and the comfortable and uncomfortable. The possibility of tension, conflict and failure are increased when exploring new ideas and new curriculum. Albright (2001) suggests that considering hidden assumptions and personal failures in teaching

might be as productive as searching out 'best practice'. When the stance of exploring is adopted, failures, contradictions and assumptions can be extracted for consideration and examination in a safe and productive manner. In conversation about program changes, participants expressed contradictory feelings and opinions regarding the implementation process. New emphases described as strengths were often also explored as challenges. While an overall, favorable experience and appreciation for the program was expressed by the participants, it was not without slight reservations. The desire to hold onto familiar and traditional methods, texts, and plans was counter balanced with a sense of excitement at exploring new ideas, options and texts. The tensions between old and comfortable and new and untested continue to challenge each of my participants.

For example, Erica implemented a silent reading program in her classroom to complement her role as lead teacher for the Comprehension and Communication project in her division supported by Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). She was deeply committed to assisting students with reading comprehension and recognized that students need unstructured free reading time in class to practice, experience and model effective reading behaviors. Knickerbocker and Rycik (2002, p. 200) suggest that readers need to experience literature relevant to their own lives where they are able to use personal experience to construct interpretations. Reading for personal pleasure enhances students' knowledge of vocabulary, sentence structure, text conventions and background knowledge. However, Erica still felt the pull of 'covering

material' and the guilt of 'wasting' valuable class time on reading for pleasure in high school. She stated that to "compensate for my feeling of doing that [referring to her half hour twice per week of in class silent reading], I've really tried to work my metacognition into this" (Erica #3: 7). By attending to metacognition in her silent reading program, where students had personal reading choices and were not necessarily engaged in the classics or the approved novel list, she felt justified that her choice was worthwhile. Later, in the same conversation, she expressed that, "I'm really not struggling with justifying my time", but then added, "I'm still struggling with that [evaluation]" (Erica #3: 8). Even though committed to personal reading choices, Erica felt that it had to be assessed to be valid and as 5% of the course time for the year, it should contribute in some valid way to 5% of the students' marks. Living in this tension manifested itself differently for each participant.

Emphasis Shifts

Context

'Context' is the elements in a communication situation, which influence the interpretation and/or creation of text (Alberta Learning, 2003a). Significant emphasis is placed on context in the text creation pages of the Program of Studies. Both personal and analytical response need to be made specifically to context. Purpose, audience and situation are central to student understanding of text and creation of text. Clear understanding of these elements influences form and

content. This new emphasis encourages teachers to make the context of assignments clear to students.

For Anna, a tension arose from recognizing the personal connections and importance of context that she may not have given as much credence to previously. She worked to balance her assumptions with student needs and interests while shifting the responsibility for building connections from herself to her students. Although she believed she was able to explain ideas clearly for students, she thought that she may have made assumptions regarding prior knowledge. In her ELA 30-1 class, as she emphasized the idea of context and personal connections, Anna wanted her students to take more ownership, as seen in the following excerpt where she noted their making text to self, world and other text connections.

> I've noticed that my students are starting to find those things on their own, you know, like I don't always have time to look through the newspaper from cover, you know, from section to section every week. When we were doing our, our *Night* unit, there was two articles in two consecutive weeks that were connected. One was Elie Wiesel and the other one was this other gentleman who we had watched in a video, and they brought them to me and said, look what we found in the newspaper today, Ms S., it's that guy! You know, and I thought; ah, now we're getting. (Anna#3: 3-4)

Broadened Definition of Text and Literacy

Teachers' literary theories are guided by questions of legitimacy and interpretation, assimilated practices from personal education, and established practices surrounding them (Rosenblatt, 2003). Assumptions of learning process, the nature of reading process, and reader-text relationship are all grounded in

assumptions about the nature of language and the epistemology of knowledge to which we, as individuals, subscribe. I intentionally did not focus on literary theory and an analysis of each participant's personal literary theory. The scope of the research did not delve into literary theories, but it did reveal tensions and assumptions about what counts as literacy, as text, and as interpretation. Each participant brought her assimilated practice and established practice from which she made observations, changes, and selections.

The broadening of the definition of text to include all oral, print, visual, and multimedia texts legitimates and gives credibility to genres that may have been ignored or marginalized in ELA classes before. As the subject of 'English' evolves, teachers' personal literary theories are revised. "For curriculum change to take effect, teachers need to find again a sense of purpose, satisfaction and achievement in the subject's new aims and forms" (Beavis, 2000, p. 58). This begs the question of "What exactly is proper to teach?" (Trifonas, 2001, para. 6). While discussion and debate continue in the research literature, the classroom teacher is still required to make daily decisions regarding texts. Wyatt-Smith (2000) provides a list of questions teachers might want to consider when selecting texts:

- What are the criteria for choosing texts? and
- Who has the right to choose? and
- What propositions about texts and textual meaning/s are on offer in classroom talk and other activities? and
- How do assessment regimes work to encourage, even coerce students to accept certain readings of texts as given or beyond question? (p. 77)

Her position recognizes that language is both culturally and socially embedded in ideology, situation, time, place and society. The conventions of a genre, its textual features, audience and purpose all contribute to the meaning of a text. It is important for students to have broad and varied experiences with texts they both encounter and create.

This wider definition of text and literacy also reinforces the importance of student choice. Students need a variety of choices in the types of text they encounter for interpretation, as well as the texts they create. Trifonas (2001), in defining multiple literacies, suggests that the responder is responsible for justifying her or his response while simultaneously remaining open to alternative responses, thus creating dialogue. The open, unpredictable and multiple nature of texts requires students and teachers alike to "1) move beyond discursive norms, 2) cross the borders of textual propriety, 3) decenter authority for an ethic of collaborative meaning-making, and 4) realize that reinventing the self and community demands a sustained reflection about difference" (Trifonas, 2001, para. 3). In order to create varied student experiences, ELA teachers need to work through the process of recentering their understanding of text and what is to be taught.

Anna, Erica and I all participated in a Comprehension and Communication professional development project, which often slid into our conversations as we discussed the implementation of our new program. Even though 'we' spoke of having a broader definition of text, conversations still concentrated on traditional text forms and genres such as the novel, Shakespeare and the short story, with

emphasis on the literary essay required for the grade 12 diploma exam. We talked about removing or killing reading for pleasure by always teaching tragic and depressing literature. When we did share titles that were lighter in humor, they were only recommended for personal reading time because, "you can't teach that as, you know, as literature" (Erica #2: 23). Further in the conversation, Erica expressed frustration at the choice we offer to children for reading. A 'neat' book that was not necessarily 'deep' could be a free reading choice but "you really can't write your diploma exam based on this" (#2: 24).

When examining the broader definition of text and value judgements on the quality of text, Erica observed, "that there's so much out that not everything has to be 'literature'[quotes added]" (#2: 24). Erica's affectation of the word 'literature' in a snobby voice captured the tension inherent in our text choices for classroom literature. Each of us made value judgments when we selected our texts. While Erica may have shown some distain for the pressure of always needing to teach 'literature', she still thought that a certain level of quality was required and so she may recommend a book to a student that was for pleasure only, not significant study. These statements represent conflicting beliefs about the purpose of reading, the value of reading and the status of texts.

The Program of Studies may have broadened the definition of text, but has the teaching population of Alberta captured the spirit of that intent? Wyatt-Smith (2000) suggests that ideological shifts in "the status of literature and particular models of language, as well as ways of being and doing as an English teacher" (p. 78) may have created a perceived risk to English teacher's perspectives and

identities. This perceived risk may keep some teachers firmly entrenched in traditional canon. Anna commented that she quit marking diploma exams because teaching colleagues on the marking floor remained entrenched in the traditional canon and fixed interpretations of literature.

> Anna: That's probably what bothered me the last few times that I marked the diploma exam. There was a core of teachers marking there who are only interested in literature, and they were highly critical of kids who took a more realistic and perhaps popular approach to it. (#2: 25)

> Anna: [W]hen I marked I thought, I had to stop doing it 'cause …you guys are just pissing me off 'cause you're not opening your mind to anything different, so you go and mark in the ivory tower, and ...I'll take a break from it for a little while, while I just think. (#2: 31)

While frustrated by narrow interpretations of acceptable text, both Anna and Erica expressed critical opinions when the diploma exam used a non-traditional text such as a prose poem or a Comedia del Arte play. They thought the use of the prose poem challenged and contradicted the restrictions students faced when writing the personal response where prose was a requirement. Both Anna and Erica were very uncomfortable with the level of difficulty in relation to the Comedia del Arte play. While they both sought to broaden the definition of texts, they were uncomfortable when the broadened definition was imposed by an exam. They simultaneously welcomed text definitions that fit their personal experience while rejecting those that were outside their personal experience. It seems the pressure of the diploma exam may hinder the exploration of new texts.

Also connected to issues of broadened text definitions are feature films, multi-media, and popular non-fiction. Each participant had her own personal

tension, comfort and definitions of acceptable text. Each participant saw feature film, multi-media and popular non-fiction in different ways. Rae suggested she was still traditional in her approach to text, but strove to broaden her personal choices. Anna welcomed the additions of visual text, "which she didn't really see as being a component at all before, at least not in the 10, 20, 30 stream" (Anna Initial: 2). She suggested that visual literacy was more interesting to students and reflected their personal experience with visual messages in a more realistic way.

These text types bring issues of interpretation and creation. When the definition of text is broadened, so are the acceptable forms of creation. In response to the question, "What are your biggest challenges with the new program?", Anna expressed concern that she may not know enough about particular genres of text in order to assist students with writing and then with assessing the texts.

> Anna: The variety of written output, too, is why I think that I struggle with it.
>
> Susan: Yeah. It's getting…
>
> Anna: Partially because some of it I honestly don't understand what practical purpose, if you'll pardon the expression, there is, like why are they going to need to know how to write a script? Some of those things.
>
> Rae: I agree…
>
> Erica: I struggle, I should be doing that…
>
> Anna: But the other thing, too, is I don't know how to write those things myself, so there's a bit of a, discrepancy there. I don't know how to write a good script. I've never written, had to write a script for anything. I don't know how to write a good short story.

Susan: Yeah.

Anna: You know, I don't even know if I know how to tell if a short story is good or not. When I read one by Nathaniel Hawthorne, its kind of whether I like it or not, whether I understood it, so maybe then when it comes to evaluation, how do I decide if you wrote a good script? Like, I think your story sucks, but it could be crafted very well, you know what I mean? So, I'm not sure what the standard is for some of those things, and I've seen all those rubrics, and *Sightlines* guides, I've seen all that stuff, but I don't know that that necessarily clarifies it for me, so…

Susan: Right.

Anna: I think that's part of my problem is I just don't know. (#3: 14-15)

Anna's candid admission of personally not knowing how to write or how to assess student's work accurately within the more creative or newer genres illuminates that the process of implementation requires significant personal reflection or metacognition by the teacher. Begoray (2001) suggests that, "[n]ew knowledge and risk taking attitudes such as giving up a measure of control and certitude are necessary for teachers to help learners experience, understand and create texts" (para. 9) outside the standard and classic genres. It also requires the support of time and professional development. In order to implement the new program, each of the participants had taken some time to examine their weaknesses, highlight their strengths and sought changes to areas they felt would need to be addressed. Anna's personal tension and struggle was with text creation, but each participant shared similar concerns regarding personal weaknesses.

Metacognition

The emphasis of metacognition also contributes to student ownership of learning and is a key addition to the curriculum. Metacognition is a critical strength to the new program, but is a very challenging concept to implement in a meaningful and authentic way. The study of language brings conscious attention to personal learning and thinking processes, which in turn provides students with greater control over these processes (Alberta Learning, 2003a). Metacognition as a process is not new, but actively and consistently teaching students about their thinking processes in English Language Arts in Alberta is new. Those engaged "in metacognition recognize the requirements of the task at hand, reflect on strategies and skills they may employ, appraise their strengths and weaknesses in the uses of these strategies and skills, make modifications, and monitor subsequent strategies" (Alberta Learning, 2003b, p. 35). I find that the language to talk about metacognition is a powerful acquisition for both student and personal learning. Bringing conscious attention to choices and actions for students made my personal choices and actions for implementation more conscious and successful. However, it poses extensive challenges for implementation.

Metacognition proved a challenging aspect of the new curriculum to implement for each participant. Rae captured part of the issue with the following statement, "I think, how reflective do we have to be about our own, and as you said, writing or reading, or whatever?" (#3: 15). As teachers, we need to be reflective practitioners. Schon (1987) suggests that, "[t]hrough complementary acts of naming and framing, the practitioner selects things for attention and

organizes them, guided by an appreciation of the situation that gives it coherence and sets a direction for action" (p. 4). As we name and frame our learning of a new program, I believe it is easier to create reflective experiences for students in the classroom. Each action undertaken in the exploration of the new program contributes to a participant's local, individual situation and understanding.

The second issue Rae addressed was that, "I'm thinking most of us are doing this because somehow it came to us fairly naturally, whether it's reading, whether its writing, and how do you teach someone?" (#3: 15). The natural ability to do something well can be less reflected on and therefore more inaccessible to conscious thought. Metacognition requires one to actively consider the processes she or he uses to learn and this is difficult to identify when the process is unconscious. Rae identified a specific skill of insightful interpretation, which comes naturally to her, and wondered how to help her students. "I'd love you all to be insightful in your essays, but how do I teach you to be insightful? I haven't got a clue,...for most of us it worked, it clicked, and yet to teach to, to get there, that's tough" (Rae #3: 15).

Erica saw metacognition as her greatest challenge. For her, the issue was moving it beyond a superficial checklist into authentic personal assessment of learning. She felt she had met this challenge through a division-wide, professional development project focusing on comprehension and communication. Her lead teacher experience this past year provided opportunities to examine the practices of several other teachers with whom she worked. This gift of resources, time and observation now had her attempting new ideas in her classroom. She believed she

was still in the process of finding effective assignments for metacognition, but that her comfort was growing. She had infused the Comprehension and Communication project, which relies heavily on metacognition strategies, into her classroom experiences. Early in the lead teacher position, she analyzed the correlations between the Comprehension and Communication project and the new program. She created a handout for other teachers in the project to illustrate how the project was not extra to their curriculum but rather was complementary and supportive. Erica shared her conviction that the project Anna, Erica and I were engaged with aligned closely with the new program. In the following statement, Erica commented on how this examination had helped her to refute colleagues' assessment that AISI was extra to curriculum as opposed to embedded in it.

> I think it's exactly what the new program is. You know one of the things I did, I went through and I pulled out from our Program of Studies all of the outcomes that have to do with reading strategies, and it meets probably, I don't know, a third to half of the, the curriculum, just by doing it. It's amazing actually… What it does, or for me then it was…some people going, well, this AISI's kind of extra. Well, no, it's not. Actually, it supports our curriculum perfectly, and when we do the things that are there, we're meeting our outcomes. (Erica #4: 3)

I have been working with metacognition for five years and I am finally now feeling comfortable with my understanding and implementation. I found metacognition to be my most powerful acquisition for teaching the new program. Perhaps it was not an acquisition, but rather a (re)acquaintance with an old friend, one who is always working, but rarely heard from (Bowsfield, 2005). Bringing conscious attention to choices and actions made the implementation journey more successful for me. It first required setting some expectations, outcomes and

requirements for program changes. Next, I reflected on and selected what skills I had, what strategies I needed to acquire, and what prior knowledge I already held.

This active process of assessing my personal relationship with metacognition contributed to my choices in the classroom. I openly shared my choices, reasons, weaknesses and strengths with my students. I modeled reading behaviors, shared stories about actively seeking peer editors, rereading texts, using sticky notes and other metacognitive strategies. The following anecdote illustrates how I approached metacognition.

> Susan: I always tell my kids about how I learned to teach, or how I learned *Romeo and Juliet,* so that I could teach it…I remember that summer sitting with three books, and I had the HBJ text that we were going to use, I had another version of *Romeo and Juliet* with different notes, and then I had the [text], in plain English, and so I'm reading, I'd read this page, then this page, then this page and this page, and so, and I, I tell the kids, you know, this is how I had to work through the process of, of getting over being intimidated teaching you, or being prepared to help you with this text. (#5: 13)

For me to attain an understanding of metacognition, I needed to assess my own understanding and metacognition processes first. Dembo (2001) believes, "teachers need to learn how to learn" (para. 11). Dembo's article shares examples of preservice teachers' reluctance to examine their learning strategies because they simply do not have time or have too much to read. He believes in order for teachers to be truly effective teachers of learning, they must first gain understanding and insight into their own learning. I found this notion to be particularly helpful in developing strategies to share with students. I needed to examine my learning process in order to teach learning process. This required the

use of and examination of my declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge and self-regulation, with self-regulation defined "as the ability of students to control factors or conditions affecting their learning" (para. 20). By sharing personal examples with students, I found they were more willing to engage in the process of self-regulation.

Representing

The addition of representing, as the companion strand to viewing, is a shift evolving out of contemporary life. While viewing involves attending to and comprehending details in visual media, representing requires students to communicate understanding and ideas through the creation of visual media. (Governments of Alberta et al., 1998, p. 3) Representing not only incorporates the visual such as art, tableau, photographs, video, graphs, and tables, etc, it may also extend to oral components such as tone of voice, music, and sound effects. Eisner (1994) has been a strong advocate for the inclusion of various sign systems in classroom instruction to expand cognitive experiences and meaning making opportunities for students. This new emphasis requires students to engage in alternative ways to demonstrate understanding and meet outcomes. Teachers did all of this before this emphasis shift, with posters, staging scenes, et cetera, but it was not a requirement of the program. Now, it allows students to highlight existing communication strengths, which may not have been seen previously as legitimate skills in language arts. In Kist's (2002) review of perspectives on 'new literacy', he notes various umbrellas and perspectives in defining 'new literacy'.

However, agreement exists around the importance of "multiple forms of representation" (p. 370) in making classrooms less 'print-centric'.

While representing opens opportunities for students whose talents are best represented outside of reading and writing, the new strand was problematic to the participants in a variety of ways. Begoray (2001) observes that teachers experience various challenges with representing, including personal ambivalence, time constraints, student attitudes and presentation versus content. In my research, participants feared misinterpreting a student's intent. They also struggled with authentic assessment, and general lack of personal knowledge, experience, and expertise with the new genres.

> Susan: One of the things that changed for me is representing. I really enjoy the representing outcome because I think it helps those kids that aren't necessarily powerhouses in reading and writing. It gives them opportunities to show their success, and that they really are learning in sophisticated ways, but I sometimes struggle with marking it, you know, how do I establish a strong and a standard that, or not get tricked maybe by the glitz. You know, a powerpoint presentation that just, wow, it looks so amazing, but it's devoid of content… not letting the form overwhelm me to, to think that there's great content there when there isn't.

> Anna: I like some of the rubrics that are in, I don't remember which one it, which one it comes out of, but there's one of them that's a presentation… and there are four categories that they're evaluated on. Only one of them is connected with how the thing looks…. But what I find even within that is...how do you mark a kid who spent hours and hours …on this drawing of a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, and you want to reward them for having taken all that time, but then at the same time you go, well, its just a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. It doesn't, you know, there is not any real interpretation going into that other than the fact that they have a

picture in their head, and then they draw what they think it would look like. So that is, it is a more complicated thing, for sure. But, and then, too, the skill level, like what I think would be really good to an artist might not be so great, but you know, trying to find that scale. And collages, I find really hard to, to evaluate, too, sometimes. So I, I got them now to pick five or six images in it and explain to me the significance of the image, and tell me what they were trying to get at with the pictures so that I don't write it off as just a whole bunch of lips, and when maybe the lips maybe have some significance. You know, like it's hard to go strictly by visual text and not expect them to write anything on there to help you when you're trying to interpret what they meant.

Susan: Is that a holdover from our, our need for print text, you know, we were raised with print text being the privileged, and pretty much only text. But I agree with you, I feel much more confident that I know and understand what they're trying to communicate with the collage when they give, and it doesn't have to be long, but a little write-up about, you know, why they selected what they did.

Anna: Yeah. And I think for me it's a fear that I'm not going to reward them for having a great idea just because I don't necessarily see it the way that they would, you know, and I don't mark them on, I don't mark them on the, the quality of their sentences. I don't mark them on grammar, or anything like organization, I just mark them on what they say they saw, and why they put that church on there, or why they have all of those lips on there, or what the lips mean. That, you know, so it's more the quality of their idea than it is how they actually articulated that idea to me in writing. (Anna Initial: 9-10)

Even though representation can offer concrete and abstract evidence of a student's learning to aid in assessment, it seemed at present participants were not totally comfortable with their ability to assess student work authentically. When Anna shared her observations and strategy of including write-ups with

representing assignments with the whole conversation group, similar concerns were shared and reiterated by other participants.

> Anna: I, I find that some of the things I give them to do where they're allowed to, to create a visual that connects, that I also have to demand that there is a bit of a write-up that goes with it 'cause sometimes I don't see it. Like it looks like it's just a blue, you know, a blue page with a yellow circle in the middle, and it doesn't mean anything to me. But then when they talk about it, you can see that they really had something in there, but if I just went by what I saw.
>
> Rae: I find evaluation tough. I find that really tough because I look at it, and it, I find it not different from evaluating poetry, really, because, you know, justifying even what you see, or what's not there, or what is there is, is difficult to do. But you're right with write-ups because I'm thinking of my grade 10's were doing ads, and sometimes I just, I just give them back. I said, okay, I don't get it. You have to explain this to me. And I thought, maybe it's me. But, you know, yeah, they have to… they have to explain.
>
> Anna: Yeah, and I guess on some level maybe that means that they haven't done what they were supposed to do, because if I watch an ad on TV, I, you know, I should get it, otherwise obviously all the millions they spent on it was useless. But then when you're talking about building a skill, then it's pretty hard to say, well, no, sorry, that's, I don't get it. (#4: 24)

This fear of undervaluing an insightful idea was further frustrated by a lack of expertise. One question I asked of the group was, "Is the need to have a short write up for representing assignments a hold over from privileging written texts or is it simply lack of experience and knowledge for reading and interpreting these new genres of text?" When assessment entered the conversation, it was often linked to the new emphases in the program and representing was no exception. Again, in response to the question, "Does this lack of confidence result

from lack of personal experience?", Anna noted, "Obviously I never took a course like that in university, and I should hope now that, that representing is a part of the curriculum that they are actually offering curriculum instruction courses for people" (#4: 25). Begoray (2001) suggests that, "not only do students need opportunities to view and represent, but teachers need motivation to make these changes to include this new sign system in their teaching. They also need to have opportunities to build their own visual literacy supported, when possible by other professionals" (para. 63). Rae thought that the "longer that we've been in the classroom, the fewer of those skills that we may have picked up just automatically" (#4: 25). It became a matter of us "trying to learn it" (Rae #4: 25). In the interest of 'trying to learn it,' rural teachers were often left to their own devices and limited school resources. One such resource that shaped my use of film in the classroom is Golden's (2001) *Reading in the Dark: Using Film as a Tool in the English Classroom.* However, my main strategy in order to learn what I need has always been to seek a conversation with a colleague.

Text Creation – Broadened Definition of Text and Representation

A complementary requirement to text study is text creation. Text creation was expected and assumed to occur in the old program, but there were no guidelines or minimums. Print text was the privileged form of creation, with mention of writing the literary essay, personal essay, cover letter, poem, short story, and research report (Alberta Education, 1982). The present curriculum now defines the types of texts students must participate in creating more broadly,

including multimedia, oral, visual, and other non-print texts (Alberta Learning, 2003a).

The difficulty or popularity of this facet of curriculum change was most conspicuous by our limited, almost absent, conversation on the subject. Rarely did our conversations wander into the experience of text creation. When we did spend time on this issue, it was most often in relation to the diploma exam. On occasion, we discussed issues of representing, the new complementary strand to viewing. When I asked why we never talked about writing specifically, Erica's tongue-in-cheek response was, "Don't do it this year!" (#4: 26). This blurted statement led the following exchange that captured the essence, rationalization and guilt associated with the statement.

> Erica: Don't do it this year!
>
> Anna: Yeah!
>
> Erica: ... because I'm teaching ..... [laughter]
>
> Susan: I'm not teaching writing, I'm only teaching reading this year.....
>
> Erica: That's about how I feel! Okay, true confessions!
>
> Susan: I can blot that out.
>
> Anna: Of course, now that one, that time the recorders on, right?
>
> Susan: ..... got that at just the play section... oh.
>
> Erica: That's how I actually feel this year. My writing has suffered, although Jane and I have talked a lot about this, and she's beginning to feel that we've gone about things the wrong way, that we've always emphasized writing, whereas if we emphasize reading the writing will come from, and so I'm a, I, I agree, I, I've done

less in terms of explicit writing instruction but I see improvement.

Susan: In writing.

Erica: In writing, I do.

Rae: And I think the fact that we're more open to a variety of writing, and whether it's the personal response, or whatever, does encourage confidence and competence.

Erica: Yes.

Susan: Right.

Rae: And that does make a difference, but I still think, when we can't get kids to read enough, it does limit their writing.

Susan: How can you write something really well when you have such limited exposure to well written text?

Rae: That's right.

Susan: So you have no models, you're not carrying it around with you.

Rae: And, just the limited vocabularies that they have.

Susan: Umhm.

Anna: And if you're struggling to understand what something means, then it's impossible to pay attention to the sentence construction and the mechanics of it, right, 'cause all you're doing is, oh, what the hell is it about? (#4: 26-7)

The exchange was filled with laughter and gentle prodding at our flaws, which often happened when individuals, or sometimes the whole-group, expressed concern, guilt or inadequacy with regard to our implementation of the new program. In reality, there was evidence throughout my research from all participants that there were various assignments, writing projects, and other

learning representations taking place in their classrooms, but there was a perceived lack of conscious thought and action with regard to writing. Perhaps with seven days of professional development devoted to the issue of reading comprehension, Erica and Anna both suggested their dedication to writing instruction had suffered because of their concentrated effort on reading. However, they thought this might be justified by the explicit time spent on improving reading and the potential transferring of reading skills to writing skills. Change takes considerable time and effort and it may be unreasonable to expect all strands and fibers of the new curriculum to be woven into the program with the same density, intricacy or expertise.

Interconnections

Many of the changes represented in the new program are best considered emphasis shifts rather than outright changes. In some ways, the document caught up to changing contemporary lives and the powerful influence of visual and auditory stimulus. The increase of computer use in every school, and most homes, changes the way society communicates, and English Language Arts needs to contribute to student understanding of new communication tools, technologies and genres.

For the sake of coherent discussion, I have separated the explorations of the conversation group into emphasis shifts or additions, but these separate categorical divisions are only structures of organization. Repeatedly topics would weave intricate and inseparable patterns, tying several categories together. The

complexity of language, the interdependency of strategies, the overlapping of concepts create relationships that are at times obvious while at other times become the background. For example, representation is also a form of text creation that uses metacognition, context and truly broadens the definition of text.

The Professional Conversation Group was a learning system comprised of four English Language Arts (ELA) teachers who were and are learners of a new curriculum. By standing in the learner's position, we were much more forgiving of our period of transition with both its successes and failures. We did not expect perfection now; rather, we envisaged a process that gradually changes over the course of several years. In the conversation group, 'we' took the role of students as we shared our tentative understandings and explored our curriculum implementation together. 'We' were not lost, but simply unmapped as we experimented with new language forms, representations, and perspectives.

As our explorations continued, we shaped and reshaped our understanding. The experiences of teachers coming to know and teach a new curriculum parallels the desired outcomes of the Program of Studies 'we' are being asked to implement. Phasing in the new curriculum over three years has allowed for exploration. Just as we ask these outcomes from our students, so must we explore our tentative understandings, interpretations and positions, "experimentation with language, image and structures, new perspectives, expression of preferences and expanded interests while setting goals for growth" (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 12). Professional conversations provide multiple opportunities to explore a curriculum's web of relationships. The tensions

experienced by participants are tightly woven interconnections of curriculum. The pull of this choice or that choice, traditional or current, new versus old, all contribute to an interpretation and experience with the new Program of Studies. An individual's interpretation is also enhanced when the relationships developed to support implementation create possibilities greater than any one individual is capable of creating on her own.

CHAPTER 4

Conversation of Comprehension and Response

> Constructing meaning from texts is fundamental to senior high school English Language Arts. As students [teachers] study texts in oral, print, visual and multimedia forms, they use a variety of strategies to determine the what of a text—the content that is being presented by the text creator. Students [teachers] engage their prior knowledge of content as they encounter new texts. They identify and examine a text creator's purpose and audience, and they consider the interplay between texts and context. Students [teachers] use their skills as listeners, readers, and viewers to detect the tones and registers adopted by text creators. They use references, including the understandings and interpretations of others, to assist them in forming their own understandings and interpretations of text. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 21)
>
> By using their creative imaginations, students [teacher] synthesize responses that take them more deeply into the world of a text or that extend their own worlds by transforming their understandings and perspectives. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 21)

Constructing Meaning

General Outcome Two focuses on the construction of meaning. As a complex system, the construction of meaning for the entire Professional Conversation Group exceeded individual possibilities as participants examined their personal responses to the Program of Studies. Both individual elements and the interplay of elements were considered for personal interpretation and understanding. It is the interplay, interconnection and intertexuality of ideas, which were presented by the Professional Conversation Group that exceeded individual possibilities. "Students [teachers] respond personally, critically, and creatively—often simultaneously—to the contents and context" (Alberta

Learning, 2003a, p. 21) of the Program of Studies. By considering the Professional Conversation Group students of a new text, this research encouraged the perspective and stance of open dialogue with text. Interpretation, understanding and perspectives are fluid and possibly transformative.

In order to engage students in response to text, it is important to respond to the Program of Studies. Our responses were not definitive as my participants and I are only newly engaged in the text. Our initial responses were shaped by our conversations, our actions and our opportunities. However, when we sought to create meaning of the new program, that experience indirectly contributed to our students in personal meanings. Factors that affect General Outcome Two are choices, the broadened definition of text, text selection, text comprehension, and insight and interpretation of text.

Just as the experience of conversation contributed to the creation of meaning for participants so did textual interpretation. "Knowledge is not hiding in the bushes waiting to be discovered. It is continually invented" (Sumara, 2000, p. 269). In keeping with General Outcome Two, interpretation may evolve from a variety of texts. "Conversation may be with other people; or it may be with another time in history or another part of the world. Education happens when people cross into other worlds, inevitably to be confronted with new experiences and insights" (Moore, 2002, p. 324). The world of conversation is not limited to people. It can take many forms and include many texts. As readers and interpreters, we negotiate our own understandings of encounters, experiences, and texts. In this chapter, I am most interested in the conversation between people in

relation to their conversations with 'texts' including the new ELA Program of Studies. Here, text is not limited to print text.

Choices

Choice in text study is embedded in the new senior high ELA document. The table of text study supplied in the Program of Studies outlines two main categories: extended texts and shorter texts. Within the extended texts category novel, book-length non-fiction, feature film, modern play, and Shakespearean play are included. The shorter texts category includes poetry, song, short story, visual and multi-media text, essay, and popular nonfiction. Each category has a degree of emphasis required for each course and ranges from encouraged, to required, to a variety required. Some categories are linked where only one of the two is required. The combinations and possibilities for inclusion in the planned course are vast:

> Challenges posed to English by 'new' views of text and reading have the capacity to revitalize and renew the subject and extend its bounds. How that happens, how teachers do that, and how they hold on to what they see as central in the study of literature, is not fixed, but reflects the diversity and complexity of English teachers' inheritance and concerns, and the ongoing interactions through which teachers, students, and subject are continually remade. (Beavis, 2000, p. 58)

This open and required variety allows us "[t]o take risks" and suggests "that there are so many different possibilities, and even in terms of what's acceptable as literature" (Erica #2: 21). Without specific numbers of specific genres of texts required, as the previous program did for academic courses but not

for general courses, Erica saw the new program as "just less confining" (#2: 21). Feeling less constrained by the new program, Erica "never had a problem with people being at various spots, and doing different things…I feel much more able to do that with this program, and I really like that" (#3: 2).

I agreed with Erica as I often approached the classroom with an open course outline that allowed students to select some of the texts for study. Prior to the new program, I felt guilty, as if I had not done enough planning; however, now I welcome the students' input into the course. This fluid space of negotiating curriculum together enhances working relationships between students and teacher. "For me, one of the strengths is choices, and allowing students' choice…where not everybody needs to study the same novel, or even doing a variety of short story text" (Susan #3: 1) so we do not all have to do the same ones. In my classroom, the modern play may not be determined until the class decided what they want to study. The Shakespeare selection may be a choice between two. Short stories may be student selected from a single literary anthology. Finding ways to manage the choices provided to students can be challenging. One difficulty is the sheer vastness of possibility for text study. In order to manage, I often constrain student choices to a single textbook or within a preset number of choices. This enables students to engage in personal commitment and choice without making reading, assessing, and managing choices impossible. Johnston and McCausland's (1999) study affirms that students like choice and independence over what they learn and how it is learned. Further, and possibly more significantly, their evidence suggests, "that in the main they [students] are

more engaged in learning, put more effort into it and achieve more – and their teachers think so, too. They [teacher] think that trusting learners is rewarded" (p. 99). This practice of flexible course outlines encouraging student negotiation and contribution has the added benefit of keeping my program dynamic.

Text Selection – Expanding the Texts Possible

I believe the idea of expanding the possible texts is transformational in ELA instruction, because it opens possibilities and brings legitimacy to various texts. The following exchange captured the transformation in Erica's thinking about text. In response to the question, "How has your definition of text changed over the course of your career?", this conversation took place.

> Erica: Yeah. Well, you know, it used to be the real conventional, it was a book, it had to be print, preferably long.
>
> Susan: Yeah! (laughter)
>
> Erica: You know, always long, and now there's so much more. We always used to look at movies as being supplementary, and a bonus kind of thing, now that's absolutely a part of, that is a particular kind of text. Using, looking at newspapers, looking at photographs, and cartoons, and all of those kinds of things that we always used to think of being supplementary to, they are now a core part of what we look at, and they are all valuable kinds of texts. They're all legitimate, whereas I think we used to feel that some things were not legitimate kinds of texts, and we'd close our door, so no one would know that we were doing that because you shouldn't be.
>
> Susan: You feel guilty pulling, pushing the video cart down the…

Erica: Exactly! Or even have a free afternoon, you know, that was the way things were looked at.

Susan: Getting past that mentality, and giving that work credibility. (Erica Initial: 2)

The ELA teachers in the conversation group were all in the process of adjusting their personal stances on valid and appropriate texts for study. However, this can become a challenging aspect considering administration, parents, students and colleagues. It is important to expand the range of texts available for interpretation and response for both students and the teaching community around them. Shifting a genre of text from a stance of supplementary to core changes the status of a text and opens it for legitimate interpretation. This transition is, at times, uncomfortable but rewarding. It may even challenge the individual's original beliefs. Anna's adjustment to her approach to teaching Shakespeare showed an example of personal change.

> Well, and this year in all of my classes, even though that was against, sort of against my principles, I showed them Act I, and then we read it, and discussed it, I showed them Act II, and then we read it and discussed it, and their understanding was way better than they ever had been before. Even with the 30's I did that 'cause I thought, you know, it kind of doesn't make sense when I know for myself in high school I would not have understood a word of it unless my teacher had told me what they were saying. I thought, 'Let's try to make this a little more tangible for these guys so that they might actually think about writing on it on the diploma exam,' and so on and so forth, so I sort of broke down a bit myself. (Anna #5: 14)

Anna made a sharp adjustment of original beliefs when she accepted a Shakespearean movie as a legitimate text to enhance student understanding. However, she still viewed the decision as a weakening of standards or "breaking

down" (Anna #5: 14). Uncomfortable with being seen as less than rigorous, she was able to acknowledge that a great comparative conversation emerged from the students' engagement with both texts. She found students were questioning, "How come it's not the same?" (Anna #5: 14) This presented the opportunity of discussing "directorial discretion" and convention differences. While she was uncomfortable with the shift in stance, she saw value in changing her approach to make Shakespeare more tangible and accessible for her students.

For Rae, broadening the definition of text included broadening strategies for assisting students' understanding of difficult text. Rae was probably the least comfortable with texts outside of traditional literary genres. She was bothered by using a particular publisher's Shakespearian series, wondering, "Why am I buying these books for these kids that have all of these explanations there? But you know what? Their comfort level was so much better." (Rae #5: 13) She considered herself "too uptight" and noted that "it's a more challenging task than perhaps I realized" (Rae #5: 13). Her comfort level grew when she saw her students "getting it" and she realized that the extra time viewing an annotated text "made such a difference" (Rae #5: 14).

Rae thought her weaknesses with the new program were in media, film and representing, but she continually sought conversations that supported her learning and growth in this area. In Rae's words, "[m]y knowledge of films is more limited probably than anything" (#1: 25). Rae expressed conflicted concern in text selection and assignment design when she said:

> I think I'm still not providing students with as much opportunity for some of the less traditional approaches

> because, you know, the reality is they still have to be able to read and write well, and so I still feel that I have to focus on that a little bit more than the others, and I don't think that's a bad thing. (Rae Initial:8)

As ELA teachers, we come to reading with multiple experiences and multiple tensions and contradictions. What is valued as 'text' has changed and how texts are interpreted and considered has changed over the course of our careers. However, one of the apparent contradictions captured in the previous conversations with participants is central to our understandings of text. We crave a certainty and a sense of comfort with text. Maxine Greene (1995) captures the tension of interpreting text in her summary statement on Iser.

> Wolfgang Iser, in *The Act of Reading*, speaks of the ways in which people cling to the classic paradigms where reading is concerned: they seek out hidden meanings; they yearn for revelation of a symmetrical, unified, complete totality (1980, pp. 13-15). At the same time, they recognize that the traditional paradigms no longer hold and that we can no longer posit an objective system to which our ideas and fictions ought to "correspond." (p. 96)

While all participants have explored a variety of texts for student study, we were all at various stages on the continuum of acceptable text, range of interpretation and literary theory. Judgements were affected both internally and externally by personal theories regarding pedagogy and the nature of knowing. An individual's definition of appropriate text was in a constant state of flux depending on the nature of the students in the class, the dynamics of the classroom, and the level of confidence an individual felt with a genre. For example, I have never used graphic novels in my classroom and in the past have considered them somewhat childish. However, I remember at one point defending

a university online course on graphic novels, although I was still unwilling to accept them as appropriate texts for a senior high classroom. After attending a seminar class on the graphic novel, I came to appreciate their sophistication and would consider using them with various classes for different purposes. It was necessary for me to experience professional conversation and acquire personal professional knowledge in order to adopt a more open attitude toward this genre.

Johnston (2000), an advocate for multicultural literature, states that teachers are often constrained by such factors as budgets and authorized reading lists, which reinforce canonized lists of white Western male authors. Participants not only needed to make personal adjustments, but they also felt pressure to fit their choices into the wider teaching community, particularly in relation to the diploma exam and public perceptions. Anna thought that students who "took more realistic and perhaps popular" (Anna #2: 25) approaches were criticized and not always awarded deserved credit. Deciding to make a choice considered more popular and less literary based has consequences for students' exam scores and is, therefore, weighed carefully. Risks are taken when there is sufficient confidence of success and this may contribute to a slow and conservative change in text legitimacy.

Anna's experience of bringing in popular media and television into her class was met with resistance and questions about purpose and productivity. The questions came from a variety of sources including students, parents, and the general public. The public and parents often consider change outside of their personal experience untrustworthy. Legg[illegible]2000) presents the challenge of media

studies in terms of tensions, choices and critical wisdom. "This place of tension between the advantages and disadvantages of the mass media is a place where students and teachers and parents dwell, whether they are comfortable or not" (p. 168). In Anna's classes, she created media units where students spend considerable time examining form, purpose, content and conventions of various media. She created opportunities for students "to discuss openly and freely the complex and contradictory and conflicting and cogent cacophony of messages on TV" (p. 170). She would bring in, for example, episodes of *The Simpsons* to juxtapose the satirized version of a traditional literary classic. Anna shared her observations regarding peoples' reactions and subtle resistance to non-traditional text choices.

> Then when you talk to people who were, you know, who went through the traditional system like we have, they're like, what, you guys talk about *The Simpsons*, and you analyze movies and stuff in English, what's happening to education? You know what I mean... They don't, and I'm sure parents, too, are wondering, what? You spent how many weeks talking about TV? You know, so then you get in to a problem again, what are you teaching our kids, they're supposed to be reading literature. (#3: 23)

This commonsense idea of legitimate texts is pervasive in both ELA teachers and the public's perceptions. Traditional choices are safe and often unquestioned. However, if they are the only choices available to the students in an ELA program, then the spirit and intent of expanding possibilities for interpretation is sharply limited.

New Novel List

The question, "Have you seen the new novel list?" (Susan #1: 20) set off an interesting thread that ran through every group conversation. This thread captured Erica's implementation of a novel list released only months before the end of the 2004 school year. The running dialogues captured Erica's intentions and include elements of our Comprehension and Communication project, planning, and assessment. While Erica was the only teacher of the group attempting to incorporate the new list, the rest of us participated in the conversation with questions and suggestions. At the time of the first conversation, the list was just released. By the second, Erica had ordered new novels; by the third, she justified the novels not arriving on time; and by the fourth it became, "The novels have arrived, now what?" By the fifth conversation, the final product was ready. The release of the new novel list paralleled the release and implementation of the new Program of Studies. Some teachers would wade in immediately, looking for new possibilities, while others would stand at the shore and cautiously watch others' experiences before they made personal decisions.

Erica was a jumper. She appeared to see change as exciting and interesting. When I announced that Alberta Learning released the new list at English Language Arts Conference (ELAC) and that I had a copy, Erica could hardly wait. She had been checking the Internet faithfully for the month of April, knowing it was to be released in April. She asked me to email the list so she could get started. Erica supplied a rationale for her keen interest in the following statement: "[t]he reason I ask is because I'm doing 20-1 this term and I'm, been

holding off on doing, choosing a novel because I was hoping the new list would be out" (Erica #1: 22). She hoped, "I might have time to get some in and work with some new novels instead of *Lord of the Flies*, so that's why I'm dying to know what, what this actually is" (Erica #1: 22). Erica and I knew the list had been in review since the spring of 2003. She also knew an individual on "the team that reviewed everything, and you know, she's like, tight-lipped in terms of revealing what the, some of the potentials were" (Erica #1: 23).

As I named as many titles as I could remember, Rae noted that many of them were already literature she experienced on the marking floor of the January diploma exam. She wondered if teachers may have had earlier access to the list or were teachers obtaining approval from their individual school boards to use these books not previously on the list. I shared my observation that, "the rule technically is that there's the authorized list, but anything that you want to do, all you need is board approval" (Susan #1: 24). I only recently found out through conversations with others that the option of self-selecting text was available. "[A]s a young teacher, I didn't know that. I never dreamt that you could go to your school board and say, 'I would like to teach these three texts'" (Susan #1: 24).

During the second conversation, Erica shared her enthusiasm in her statement, "[t]his novel list excites me beyond imagination" (Erica #2: 10). She ordered a selection of four novels for grade 11. She feared time may prohibit doing "a lot with it, but I want them to read something new" (Erica #2: 10). With May and June looming, I offered to share a unit I obtained from a piloting

colleague. The novel study unit is very time efficient while also transferring the responsibility of interpretation to the students. The following was my offer:

> I don't know if you have it…that does the blended, they have a grade 11 novel seminar, a novel study unit, and whoever's [group of students] doing the same novel thirds the book, they meet three times. They make up the essential questions for the novel, and then they meet. Their first one is about character, the next one, I think is about symbolism, and the third one is about theme, maybe they're reverse order. So their seminars have a bit of a focus, and its really quite efficient, and it helps them to get into the novel where they don't have to do all the thinking on their own, but at the same time they're not, you don't have to be responsible for them, and for, you know, here's the list of the most important scenes, and all of that kind of thing, it's transferring that ownership. (Susan #2: 11)

During my description, there were several agreements embedded within the text, so I offered to provide a copy via email. This was a moment where I felt I was really contributing back to my participants with tangible ideas they could adopt, adapt or reject for their classroom. The newness of the novel list levelled all of our experiences. No one individual had more experience, more understanding of the texts, or expertise. Sometimes someone had read one of the novels on the list for pleasure, and could provide a personal opinion and annotated summary. We were all in the same position of starting over with new possibilities.

In our third conversation, when Erica felt certain the books would not arrive in time, the conversation centered on her creative solution for meeting the novel study requirement. Having opportunities to share alternative approaches provides a space for sounding out ideas and validating the choices. She was disappointed at not receiving the new novels, but justified her choice not to do a

formal novel study through her sustained silent reading program. She shared her rationale in conversation.

Erica: I've got all these new novels ordered for my 20's. Well, you know what? They're not going to get here on time.

Susan: Oh, that's so sad!

Erica: They're aren't, they aren't, bottom line! It is, but on the other hand, we've been reading an hour a week since the beginning of the semester, there's maybe one or two students in my class who have not read an entire novel. I have others who had read ten novels. I've done the novel.

Susan: You did the novel.

Erica: We have done the novel, and I've gone, okay, and let it go.

Susan: And let it go.

Erica: And so we will, we'll work on something else. I'll do something that I didn't think I had time for, and what it's making me do is rethink how I do the novel, maybe in grade 11, yes, I'd like you to read one from this list and a personal response and that becomes part of your reading journal. That is, that's sufficient.

Erica: Isn't that enough for the novel in grade 11?

Anna: Yeah, that makes sense.

Erica: They've done it since grade two. It's made me think about how to do things in a totally different way, and I feel really good about, because my kids are really liking what they're reading.

Susan: Yeah.

Erica: And I'm just ready to go, that's sufficient.

Susan: Well, and at the same time you're maximizing what you get out of it.

> Erica: Yeah. Yeah, and if we want to make lifelong readers, then what I've done this semester has gone more towards making lifelong readers out of many of my kids than a novel study ... (#3: 5-6)

Erica believed, "I have done the novel," "and let it go" (Erica #3: 5). Perhaps her idea was not the traditional novel study, but her students read several novels and showed signs of being more committed, lifelong readers. Erica's sharing of her alternative plans allowed her, through conversation, to validate her possible course of classroom choices. Electing to see an opportunity rather than a failure freed her to make alternative plans for units for which she felt she was running out of time. However, she was not as comfortable with her plan as she initially expressed. This lead to her change of direction by conversation four.

Conversation four brought the novels just in time, so Erica shifted her tentative plan again and decided to go ahead with a novel study. Arriving at the conversation group, she explained that she had handed out the novels and set out to describe her plan for the novel unit. She shared brief oral summaries of the novels with her students so they could make selections and, with only fourteen days left in the semester, she expected students to read the novel in the two weeks and then conduct a seminar about it. The final writing assignment was still to be determined.

One week later, to open conversation five, I asked Erica to update her plan for the grade 11 novel study. Erica's description of the novel study follows:

> The four that I had chosen are *Finding Forrester, Jurassic Park, Ash Garden* and *Girl with A Pearl Earring*, and I really clearly identified that *Ash Garden* is a real challenge. It's on the 30-1 list, and, but it's still, it's a good novel, and

> what surprised me is how many people did choose it, that more, that more than ten did choose that. And so, we approached it, everyone's reading on their own, and it has, it will be due for the 16th of June so that they have time to meet with everyone else who read it, they'll have a discussion. I'll have something for them, a story map kind of thing for them to work through, and then they'll write about it for the final writing assignment of the course. And it'll be really open as to what they do with it. I'll try and pull in some of the other things that we've done like perhaps creating a found poem, creating some kind of visual, doing a creative response, doing just a regular response, that approach as opposed to a formal essay is what I'm looking at. (Erica #5: 1)

Erica's choices surrounding the implementation of a new novel study closely tied in with the new Program of Studies emphases shift of context, personal response, metacognition, broadened definition of text (creation) and representation. She elected to use the novel as the culminating assignment and intended to create a context related to other projects over the semester. She planned for group discussions guided by story maps or another graphic organizer to assist students in focusing on the themes and issues presented in the novel without being too prescriptive. Her project decisions were very independent for the learner and created wide opportunities for personal interpretation.

The project was also very tentative and exploratory. Erica alluded to a sense of experimentation. She accepted questions, comments, and ideas regarding the final assessment. The conversation appeared to help clarify, for her, her purpose and choices. She hoped that the experience would be beneficial to students, but did not assume it would emerge as she hoped. This conversation captured a sense of risk taking required to make changes to a program. It also

allowed for the possibility of failure. The following excerpt showed the spirit of Erica's experiment, risks and possible failure:

> Erica: ...I thought what I would do is I'll have the assignment prepared, and as they walk out of class on Wednesday, I'll hand it to them so that they have a night because I'm thinking time is important, and I would hate to arrive on an exam day and have 80 minutes and have to produce something really creative when they've not done that before, but they'll have the night.
>
> Anna: Yeah, that's good.
>
> Erica: And then they come and they write, or do whatever.
>
> Susan: Which better reflects the writing process we'd like them to use, right, with a little bit of preparation time and...
>
> Erica: That's right.
>
> Susan: And considering, and some, maybe some preplanning if they...
>
> Erica: Umhm.
>
> Erica: Sure, they can bring in a sheet in, or whatever, I don't mind that and...
>
> Anna: Would you let them bring in materials?
>
> Erica: I think so.
>
> Anna: Like if they knew they needed paints, or whatever...
>
> Erica: Yeah, yeah, I think so, 'cause I've been thinking about that, how am I going to approach that if I'm saying that they can do this, then, yes, I have to if you're going to create, yeah, you have to create in class, but you can bring the materials to create with. [several affirmative agreements]
>
> Anna: Right, yeah.

Rae: That's fair.

Erica: Like, you know, so.

Rae: Especially if they know in advance what they are going to be doing.

Erica: Yeah, I, I think so, and, like I say, we'll see if it's a total bomb, then, well, it's a total bomb .....

Anna: (very softly) [It's only] ... grade 11.

Erica: Yeah, exactly, there's nothing major riding on this, and so can, can experiment a bit, they're guinea pigs.

Anna: Yeah, and you can adjust how you mark it as well.

Erica: That's right.

Anna: If it turns out not so…

Erica: That's right, I thought for marking I would use the reflective response key from the diploma exam because it's, you know.

Rae: It's nice.

Erica: It is nice, and you can use it for any kind of assignment, basically it's what are you trying to do, what voice you bring to this, and what's the presentation, and all that stuff, so I thought that would [be] easy.

Susan: Yeah, it catches a real variety of things. (#5: 2-4)

Erica's novel study was conceived and borne out in a new way during the course of five conversations. There was no prescribed right answer or right approach, only negotiation of what may work within Erica's particular context. Instead of a strictly personal dialogue with herself as she moved through obtaining the list, selecting from the list, changing her approach completely, coming back to the original proposal and executing her unit, she engaged in an

external conversation. As Erica built her unit, she was responding to multiple forms of text. She responded to the novels she selected, to the conversation surrounding them, and to possible assignment and assessment forms.

Brooke, Coyle and Walden (2005) work from Edward Soja's (1989, 1996) notion of 'thirdspace'. Their translation of his geographically situated work to an education space, in my opinion, identified the conversation group as thirdspace, a place where 'real' and 'imagined' spaces exist in creative tension. This creative tension exists in partial conflict where realities and plans are at times contradictory. Erica worked within the real and literal firstspace of her school, and in the imagined secondplace of curriculum documents and theories of literacy. The thirdspace erupted when she imagined shaping a new novel study within the real space of her classroom from the secondspace of the Program of Studies. This thirdspace was retooled several times over the course of the two months as real and planned space collided. This "thirdspace is a place where questioning, reading, practice, and reflection are expected. Collaboration of this sort often results in eruptive energy, spurring teachers toward new study and learning. The goal is personal understanding that ultimately affects student learning" (Brooke et al., 2005, p. 375).

Erica also responded to the context of our division's Comprehension and Communication project. In implied ways, she asked how the project supported her actions in implementing the Program of Studies. She wondered if it would be simply enough to let students study a novel in a completely independent and individual way. Initially, she believed she would create that experience for her

students, but quickly abandoned that plan when the novels surprisingly arrived on time. Although she thought that personal student choice is a valuable notion in secondspace, she was not yet ready to radically change her approach to novel study in the firstspace of her classroom.

Comprehension and Communication

As mentioned before, Anna, Erica and I all participated in a division wide professional development project. The first year of the three-year project concentrated on enhancing reading comprehension for secondary students. As noted previously, this sustained attention on reading comprehension coloured our classroom choices. Alberta Initiatives for School Improvement, AISI, supports a commitment of approximately twenty-five teachers meeting seven to ten days a year to enhance literacy skills. Denti & Guerin (2004) suggest that supportive leadership, staff development, and sustained commitment are important elements in improving literacy within a school site or division. These components were present in the AISI Comprehension and Communication project.

The literacy project was grounded in research. Duke and Pearson's (2002) chapter entitled "Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension" compiles much of the research on reading comprehension. Many of the practices introduced to us, such as explicit instruction, modeling, collaborative modeling, and independent use of the strategy were identified in Duke and Pearson's chapter. As well, our professional development also included six individual comprehension strategies and the routines of reciprocal teaching and transactional

strategies instruction. Further, the teachers read and discussed practical professional resources such as Chris Tovani's (2000) *I Read It, But I Just Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescents,* and her (2004) *Do I Really Have to Teach Reading* along with Janet Allen's (2004) *Tools for Teaching Content Literacy.* Sharing interpretations of professional reading was a focal point for discussion, idea generation, and personal practice reflections.

The consultant for the project, Ida, was excellent. She created a professional development experience that truly affected our classrooms, met our needs and was genuinely perceived as valuable professional development. Ida's favourite expression was "You're the boss of the handouts." She readily acknowledged that each teacher would need to implement the ideas and strategies in a personal way. Her approach to an inservice day included time for conversation and sharing of failures and successes, handouts and overheads of theory, time to practice and model the skills with each other and time to grapple with conflicting ideas. Anna described a session day with Ida as a day where "she does not just stand up there and yap to us the whole time… you actually have things to look at, and you talk in groups, and you have exercises to do, and to me that's way better than just listening to someone droning on" (Anna Initial: 1). Besides including active participation and conversation, the sessions were spread over the entire school year with only one or two ideas introduced during a session. "I think that the sustainedness of the AISI is really important…" and without the once a month booster shot, "I find that if I don't sort of get rejuvenated, it falls by the wayside" (Susan #4: 4). Over the course of a year, multiple opportunities to

stick with it, come back to it, or revisit a strategy emerged and instead of the typical professional development pattern of inservice to shelf; it was used. The excerpt that follows captures the general group feeling about the professional development.

> Erica: You know, I think this has been the best PD that I've ever had. And it's because of the person who comes to it, Ida…she's phenomenal. She's just really, really good. Do you, Anna, do you feel the same way, like, just?
>
> Susan: I agree.
>
> Erica: Yeah, she knows her stuff, and she just gives us really practical things, and explains enough of the theory, because that's where I lack. I mean, I sometimes know what I'm doing, I just don't always know why I would do something, and the resources that she's recommended and suggested and brought to us just really make it easy to bring things into the classroom. And she's not forceful in saying this is how you have to do something, but here's the stuff, what can you do with it, and I really like that.
>
> Anna: And she doesn't seem to be talking from the ivory tower, either. You know, she realizes that maybe you can only implement three strategies in this whole year, and maybe, you know, maybe it won't work with some kids, and other times you'll say, well, let's try it, no, that didn't work, let's go back, you know, that practical, practical element of it, I think, is very helpful as well. (#4: 2)

The experience of Comprehension and Communication is a welcome addition to my professional development. Dreher (2003) reminds the senior high English teacher that our training predominately focused on understanding meaning and synthesizing ideas, whereas, elementary training familiarized teachers with the elements of reading. "Both processes are imperative in creating

readers who enjoy reading and do it well" (p. 52). Denti and Guerin (2004) suggest that changing attitudes and practices at secondary schools is challenging due to the compartmentalized subject areas. They also remark that very few secondary teachers, including English teachers, have been adequately prepared to assist students in improving literacy skills or accommodating lower reading levels. Teachers in secondary schools express evaluations similar to my following statement: as a secondary ELA teacher, I have historically been frustrated with the fact that "I've always felt that I didn't know how to teach reading," yet "consistently every year I was getting quite a few kids who were, you know, struggling readers" (Susan #4: 4). "I didn't know how, how to help, how to make it different for them, and improve things for them" (Susan #4: 4). I now feel more competent with reading instruction for both strong and struggling readers. Although I now have more strategies to improve a student's general reading ability, I am still without ways to improve student insight, imagination and perception.

Insight

Insight, perception and thoughtfulness are highly regarded as exit outcomes in grade 12. However, in my experience, helping students to make significant changes to their insights is difficult. I have very few successful strategies, an experience which was echoed by the participants. The discussion of insight began with Rae's frustrated observations.

> I think even when you're giving them feedback, you know, how do you tell a child 'you're not being insightful'? How

do you tell them 'you're not being perceptive'? But you know what, sometimes they're not and they, they don't see that. And yet when you put it in balance with, you know, with what's out there, they're not. (Rae #2: 31-2)

The rhetorical question in Rae's statement drove the following conversations. Each participant in the conversation group related to the experience of trying to assist a student who just did not see beyond the literal and conventional to create insightful responses. Unlike many of our other topics of conversation, our insight and suggestions were far more limited and frustrated. We were unable to provide strategies or solutions to each other.

The students who most commonly experience this problem cannot 'see', for lack of a better expression, why their work is considered conventional or satisfactory. One possible solution included exposing students to other works, so they could imagine possible interpretations.

Susan: That's when I think the samples and exemplars [provided by Alberta Learning] are helpful because they start to see, oh, that's sort of what you mean, because sometimes you can't teach it through your own writing, you have to see somebody else's.

Rae: That's true.

Anna: But sometimes, too, adults aren't perceptive.

Susan: Right.

Anna: You know, like some people just can't see it beyond the surface.

Susan: See it, that's right.

Anna: They'll always regurgitate what the general discussion was no matter how much you try to coach them, they just don't see it, anything deeper there, well, yeah, it's about this.

Rae: They're very literal…

Erica: That's right.

Anna: … I keep telling them, well, you need to have more depth to your argument. And they're like, I don't know how to do that. I don't see anything deeper. And I said, well, then you're just going to have to be satisfied with your 65 or your 70 because…

Rae: Some of my strongest science students, and math students have so much difficulty with that.

Erica: 'Cause its not concrete.

Rae: Yes.

Erica: You know, like they really need things, like…

Rae: They want a formula.

Erica: It's face value, like, what it is, is what it is… I have three kids of my own, and my son, when we watch commercials, for example, TV commercials, Matthew goes, "What was that about?" My eight year old [emphasis on age] will explain to him all the subtleties of it. I mean, I have two in my house who I, she has it and he doesn't, and I'm not sure how I can ever teach him to see more deeply.

Rae: Right.

Erica: And I mean that very sincerely. We talk about things but he never intuitively, there's almost that intuition that, that's part of it, he never gets it, he doesn't. (#2: 32)

As a group, we recognized the experience of being unable to assist students with insight, but we failed to propose solutions to the issue. This left me wondering if there is no way to teach insight. Is a lack of perception a "personality thing" (Erica #2: 33), or "a processing thing" (Anna #2: 33)? Does it

stem from "[w]hat kind of thinker, how you think about life" (Erica #2: 33)? Anna agreed with Rae, "I think the insight is either there or it's not…you're a great child and I love you, but you just can't look at it deeply" (Anna #3: 16). Even though we wonder if insight is predetermined, what can a teacher do when a student is not perceptive, insightful or interpretive?

By exploring our common experiences, we wondered, "What does make a difference?" We explored some of the commonsense ideas we each hold and believe make a difference, such as more reading, more experience, and more confidence. Simultaneously, we hold on to the commonsense understanding that you either have insight or you don't. This contradictory tension of beliefs contributed to our frustration. I am still wondering what options, strategies, or methods are available.

Is insight affected by age, experiences and context? Erica described two of her children: a boy and a girl. The son, although older than the daughter, does not share the daughter's subtle observations and perceptions about text or life events she experienced. Although raised in the same house, the son and daughter presented very different abilities. Even at the young age of eight, she seemed more able to discern ideas: "She has it and he doesn't, and I'm not sure how I can ever teach him to see more deeply" (Erica #2: 33). If age does not make a difference, why then do all participants believe that students who take English 30 in their grade 11 year tend to be less insightful? Rae captured this common belief as, "I can even notice the difference between a student who's taken an English 30 when they were in grade 11 in second semester, and someone who takes it in

grade 12" (Rae #3: 21). We contradicted ourselves repeatedly in our conversations on insight as we oscillated between innate versus learned, age versus experience, and reading versus experience.

We wondered if insight really is affected by reading? Although Erica read with both her children and encouraged insightful thought, she found her daughter far more naturally insightful. Rae suggested in relation to Erica's son, "[i]t will be interesting to see the kinds of things he chooses to read as he gets older, too, because that does make a difference" (Rae #2: 34).

We questioned the role of student confidence or teacher expectation in insight.

> Rae: I look at even AP [advanced placement], and so on, and I think part of it is just a confidence, that some of those kids have it. They've had some successes and they're put in this grouping, and, so they're approaching the work with more confidence whereas some of the other kids who may not have the same kinds of possibilities, have not necessarily been, you know, elevated to that level, so I think that makes a difference, too. (Rae #3: 20)

Or

> Susan: You've seen the class that's treated like the sweat hog class, and, and they become exactly that, but you've also seen a similar class where, who's been with a teacher who's, you know, challenged them and not accepting minimum standard, and they do start to come up to that, and they may not ever get to the bar that's set. They get a lot farther than they would have, and I think, if we don't expect them to be readers, or to be good readers, we shape their perceptions of themselves, maybe unintentionally. (Susan #3: 20)

I have lost track of the number of times a student who, while obtaining average marks and working hard, has never been able transcend the conventional, average idea that is possible to support but limited in imagination, creativity or

unique interpretation. Each participant expressed a concern over how we help students who want to do better with interpretation of ideas but seem only to sit on the surface, unable to construct their own perceptions of a reading in whichever media. Can insight really be taught?

Sumara (2002) suggests in his book, *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters: Imagination, Interpretation, Insight,* that insight absolutely can be taught. However, there are no quick fix solutions for improving student insight. Texts that are generally presented in ELA curriculum are treated as closed texts with a concrete truth to be excavated (Sumara, 2002). Rather than experiencing text as closed, he suggests that the indeterminacies of a text need to be recursively and elaboratively explored through annotation, response and rereading. The following passage describes one process of interpretation that may further insight.

> The commonplace practices I have described suggest that these productive indeterminacies be expanded through the addition of at least two sets of intertext annotations (in the form of in-text inscriptions) supported by individual and collective analysis. It is the practice of interpreting relationships among the in-text indeterminacies, as well as those created by several layers of intertext response that generates an interesting and productive interpretive site for readers. (Sumara, 2002, p. 34)

The ability to respond to text and construct meaning is critical to today's student. However, "Information alone does not guarantee understanding. Information needs interpretation and the latter needs a learned method" (Sumara, 2002, p. 36). Conversation is one way to form insightful understanding. The conversations professionals engage in about our positions and choices as ELA teachers shape our construction of our program. These conversations occur in multiple ways and include conversations with colleagues and conversations with

the new program as a text for interpretation and conversations with the texts to which we attend. The difficulty with the construction meaning:

> As with any act of human conversation, where meaning is continually shifted through a dance or dialogic exchange (Gadamer, 1990), shared activity requires an ongoing evolution of a structural relationship (Maturana & Varela, 1987). That one should be able to proceed without knowing everything that influences one's experiences means that human existence is always to a large extent, a surprise, not a plan. (Sumara, 2002, p. 134)

Interpretation Leads To

The construction of meaning from texts is an important element in ELA classrooms. As (teachers) students of the new Program of Studies, participants discussed their decisions regarding student choice and text selection. New novel lists and professional development that examines reading comprehension encouraged participants to explore their ideas of interpretation in an effort to further student's textual interpretations. A desire to assist students with insight created more questions than answers. However, listening to others' interpretations increases an individual's range of possible interpretations. Expanding our selections for the classroom into genres not previously included brings issues of interpretation and insight into our thinking. Prior knowledge of both curriculum and texts becomes important as we interpret the Program of Studies. There is a natural gravitation to the familiar that may require interruption so new texts and choices can be made available to students. The process of interpreting the curriculum document through conversations extends our worlds, hopefully transforming possibilities and perspectives.

CHAPTER 5

Conversations of Managing Ideas and Information

> Students [teachers] manage ideas and information to fulfill particular inquiry or research needs. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 39)
>
> Students [teachers] integrate and synthesize their findings, and, in the course of managing ideas and information, they formulate generalizations and conclusions and develop personal perspectives. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 39)
>
> Findings often lead students [teachers] to formulate new questions for further research. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 39)

Process not Content

General Outcome Three of Senior High English Language Arts (SHELA) addresses the ability to manage ideas and information, fulfilling inquiry and research needs. The data did not reveal direct discussions on research practices or experiences: therefore, I am presenting a line of conversations as a living example of the process in which we ask students to engage. This shift in focus from the content of the general outcomes to the personal process of beginning an inquiry about standardized exams is a result of the belief that research is a process, not a product. Several lines of inquiry evolved for me. Through the conversations, I have come to recognize the need for further personal research on government exams. Thinking and writing, then writing and thinking about the role of exams in the teaching of ELA has disturbed my web of relationships, and, therefore, requires reexamination.

High-Stakes Exams

This chapter concentrates on questions and issues that evolved out of conversations centered on Alberta's diploma exam set in both grade 12 course sequences. The exam is a mandatory exit exam required to fulfill graduation requirements, with a weight of 50% of a student's final grade. The exam structure for both courses includes two parts: Part A is the written response portion and Part B is multiple-choice reading. In the research literature, tests are considered high-stakes when they have broadly-based and far-reaching implications for students, teachers or schools (Guthrie, 2002; Hoffman, Paris, Salas, Patterson & Assaf, 2003; Nezavdal, 2003). Accounting for 50% of a student's grade makes the diploma exam high-stakes for the student's post secondary career as well as the teacher's instructional choices. The majority of the participants' conversations revolved around Part A, the written portion.

Manuel (2002) reveals that significant anxiety regarding the unknown existed with Australian, specifically New South Wales, teachers when they implemented a new high school certificate English syllabus. This anxiety was grounded in "how the course will be examined, how the marks will be distributed, and how the standards will be applied" (p. 134). 2004 was the year of the implementation of the redesigned diploma exams that reflected Alberta's new Program of Studies; therefore, similar to Manuel's observation, this issue of examination, marks and standards was very much in the minds of participants. Conversation about the exam emerged in every session. The diploma exam is the common, external pressure all senior high ELA teachers at the grade 12 level

experience. The conversations on this subject revealed a conflicted ambivalence regarding the exams, in relation to the role they played in a teacher's instructional choices, teacher attitudes, relationship to the new program and to the nature of writing and thinking. Until the repetitive experience of listening to the transcripts, and reflecting on my own classroom experience, I simply did not realize how many disparate ideas I could hold simultaneously in a belief system without critical examination. I had fallen into the trap of letting the exam requirements become my writing program without considering any personal beliefs about writing philosophies.

Hillocks (2002) represents the ambivalence surrounding testing when he describes the complaints, anger and frustration that students, parents, teachers and administrators convey regarding the role of testing in schools. At the same time, there is a sense of pride when a group of students does particularly well on an exam. We discount the validity of the exam on one hand, while judging student progress and our program by the exam on the other. The contradictory tension that surrounds testing leaves teachers vulnerable to accepting rather than challenging the assessments.

Using the Process of Inquiry

Although my participants experienced the original conversations, they did not share the further in-depth experience of repeatedly listening to the tapes, or reading and rereading the transcripts. My questioning and inquiries were derived from this further experience of dwelling with the data. The nature of our

conversations and the narrow scope of this research did not provide detailed individual participant observations of personal practice in relation to diploma exams; therefore, for this chapter, I used excerpts of conversation to elaborate only on personal reflections on my practice. The conversations, although often illuminating issues, contradictions and practices, did not delve into the detailed specifics of an individual's classroom, so I augmented glimmers of insight with personal questions, anecdotes, and observations outlining the multiple questions the research evoked for me. I grounded my questions in my experience and used excerpts of conversation to support my personal reflections on personal practice. In essence by conversing with the conversations, I hoped to encourage further critical inquiry, both my own and the reader's.

Pausing to reflect on personal experience with the diploma exams, I now wonder what my next step in the inquiry should be. My personal attitudes regarding the exam are very conflicted. I have used the weight of the exam to motivate unmotivated students, or I have minimized the importance of the exam for students who struggle with test anxiety or are working to the best of their ability. I say I don't teach to the exam and then I do. I have used the exemplar papers as models of good writing, but then encouraged students to take risks and be non-traditional. I have taught the structure of the five-paragraph theme while demanding creativity and originality. I profess to believe the exam stifles authentic writing but I value high scores. I reject the exam as authentic and fair assessment, but know it shapes the practice in my classroom. Further to these contradictory beliefs and actions, it should not matter how different the student's

school-awarded mark is in relation to the diploma exam mark, but it does. The school awarded mark assesses the whole range of the program rather than reading and writing in particular genres. However, I always look at marks exceeding the acceptable range of separation to see if I have justifiable explanations 'just in case.' My list of incongruent actions related to government exams can still be elaborated on, leaving me wondering what I have been doing to my students for the past seven years. I have begun to ask how many ways can one person send mixed messages to students? Howard (2003), in his examination of Newfoundland's 2001 senior high language arts exam, suggests that it is not only the individual teacher who sends mixed messages to students but also the various education departments of Canada that produce exams which mix theoretical perspectives and approaches such as selected response questions with their 'correct' answer and 'personal reflection'. How are personal philosophies, past education experiences and new theoretical stances evolving in classroom practice?

Conflicted Attitudes Towards Exams

Diploma exams came forth as an issue in the very first interview. Erica reflected on her experiences of teaching junior high, particularly grades seven and eight, where the teacher has complete discretion to set a final exam. These grades felt free. She saw grade 11 the same way.

> Erica: I'm teaching both of my courses this term in grade 11, and I love it because there's nothing that's riding on this. You know, in grade 10 you've got so much you have to make sure you cover so they can go to grade 11.

In grade 12, of course, has the diploma exams. Grade 11, it's, I just...

Susan: It's freeing.

Erica: I just feel free...I'm loving this because it's a totally new experience, and I really like teaching grade 11. I could take on grade 11, and be fine, and be very happy with that. (Erica Initial: 7)

In the first group conversation, Rae shared a similar sentiment about teaching grade 11 in her comments, "You don't have the initiation of grade 10, you don't have the pressures of grade 12" (Rae #1: 33). Skwarchuk (2004) notes that teachers involved in end point exams experienced stress and, at times, occasionally wished to change grades. Abrams, Pedulla, and Maduas (2003) also support this notion of pressure with survey data concluding, "almost twice as many teachers in high- versus low-stakes states indicated teachers at their schools wanted to transfer out of grades in which the state test was administered" (p. 27). They also observed that high-stakes testing contributed to narrowed curriculum and diminished learning opportunities in untested areas. If 'we' as teachers believe that there is limited room for explorations, and less space for fun or exciting learning opportunities at grade 12, how does this affect our practice? Are we better teachers with different approaches in grade 11 than in grade 12? Is the complexity of the classroom represented differently according to our perceived external pressures? Is there real freedom at grade 11 or are we just messing around? Or are we different, perhaps more rigid and prescribed, within our grade 12 classrooms?

Anna shared with our group that one of her grade 12 students, who had been in her class for all three years of senior high ELA, found her grade 12 course less interesting and a little boring in comparison to other years. Anna's situation seemed to reflect observations by Abrams et al. (2003) that:

> While teachers reported generally positive views towards their states [sic] curricular standards, particularly troubling was the substantial majority of teachers in both high- and low-stakes states that reported the state test has led them to teach in ways that contradict their own notions of sound educational practice. (p. 27)

Her student's criticism surprised Anna, but at the same time pressed her to reconsider some of her choices for that course. Anna wondered, "I've been thinking myself, too, that it's getting a little bit formulaic in English 30" (#5: 36). Was the student's criticism the only thing that led Anna to question her course with an exit exam as being formulaic? Was it the implementation of the exam or was it repetition of teaching the same course? What changes could she make to bring in interesting and original ideas to the grade 12 experience? Was Anna concentrating on elements related to the exam to the detriment of other outcomes and types of text? For example, does the pressure of the exam restrict time or restrict the types of texts studied or created? Candidly, Anna shared her frustration with the exam and some of the ways it may alter her practice.

> If, if they have to be able to write good essays, you know, good literary essays, it takes a bit of time to teach them how to do those things and get them into that. That's the ultimate goal 'cause of the stupid exam, and then let's fill in with, you know, unfortunately let's fill in with script writing…the world's not going to collapse if they don't know how to write a haiku, or something like that. (Anna #2: 4)

While the grades without the exam are seen as free and interesting to teach, there was a contradictory perception that the exam was necessary for 'real change' to occur. The general attitude towards the exam was that, at best, it was tolerated as something outside of our control. Yet at the same time, there was a belief that it was what would ultimately shape the practice of Alberta teachers. For example, both Erica and I shared piloting experiences where repeated conversation regarding exam redesign reflected the belief that the exam structure would set the tone for change and implementation of the new program. Erica and I were privy to a conversation with senior Alberta Learning officials in charge of the exam redesign. In reaction to the first redesign of the exam, the piloting committee thought that more significant change was required in the exam design to better reflect the new program. The following exchange captures sentiments I have heard regarding exams driving changes in teaching practice.

> Erica: That was good because we all said, 'what is the point of changing the program and demanding change, when you don't change the exam?'
>
> Erica: And people aren't going to change.
>
> Susan: Yeah, you won't change your program if the exam is not going to reflect the new program. (#4: 12-3)

Cheng and Couture (2000) suggest that public examinations have been used as accountability targets and controls for educational standards, improvements or reforms in a top-down educational change. Comment on the previous statements that practice changes most effectively with external pressure was present in my following statement, "I guess I'd like some foresight into how Alberta Learning will hold to the new exam structure 'cause outcry from the

teaching population, or a backlash, and I think that the new exam structure has potential, and I think it, it's, it's good for kids" (Rae Initial: 7). My comment referred to the political battles that pressure Alberta Learning to move in various directions. I was fearful that angry, pen-wielding English teachers might pressure Alberta Learning to limit changes to the exam structure, thus returning to the traditional, status quo examination. Here, on one hand, I believed the redesign and structure of the exam was shaping not only my practice, but was necessary for reshaping provincial practice and yet, simultaneously, would like to think that I do not teach to the exam.

This statement seems very incongruent with my beliefs about the new program and the possibilities it offers to students. I believe that the new program can be very locally centered and non-prescriptive, which allows it to be responsive to the students' needs and interests. This, however, is not supported by a provincial exam that is decontextualized and reduced to manageable, large-scale assessment. Further, my practice has changed as a result of the new program, and it did so long before the implementation of the diploma exam redesign. It changed because I had prolonged access to conversations with other ELA professionals. So why do I think it is necessary for the exam to drive 'true' program change? Have I bought into the public rhetoric that without accountability and testing nothing will ever improve or change? Are teachers this static and unresponsive to change? Why do I believe that exams will make a difference? These questions open more questions and begin to reflect the web of relationships bound together in this complex world of curriculum, conversations, experience and assessment.

In another conversation with Rae, I blatantly equated the diploma exam with the new program as virtuously synonymous. The following statement refers to my conversation with a student about his perception of successfully taking a very large risk on the ELA 30-1 pilot diploma exam. I was impressed by "the excitement that was in his, in his voice, just having written an English exam said a lot to me about what the new program can offer to them" (Rae Initial: 7). Here, I refer to the broadened definition of acceptable text creations for the personal response. On one hand, I believe that the test fairly assessed this student's risk alongside his writing and thinking ability. I suggest that the student's approach reflected the new program's spirit and intent. Would I have been so accepting if the student's mark had not reflected what I considered to be an appropriate mark for him?

Within the same conversation, Rae and I exchanged personal insights that it is not necessary to have parallel marks from the school and the diploma exam. Although we understand why marks would be different, in that the exam can only test certain, more concrete aspects of the program and it fails to touch outcomes connected to speaking listening, and representing. Teachers are reluctant to have discrepancy because of the perceived politics and pressure by school administration and Central Office. Both Rae and I have felt a subtle push from our central offices to have marks that are within a 5% range of each other. This unwritten rule has exceptions, but the exceptions are always ones we, as the teacher, should recognize, such as test anxiety, or poor attendance and assignment completion. When questioned, I am compelled to account for a student's course

mark in relation to her or his diploma exam mark. Most often the difference is explained by student attendance, effort, attitude or ability (Verkuyten, 2000). Again contradictions of perceptions surface regarding alignment of teaching practices and the new Program of Studies. Alignment is only insured for what is tested. Unfortunately, many of the most difficult outcomes (explore, represent, observe or assess) are also those excluded from the exam. They cannot be assessed in mass testing situations. In reality, the exam is only testing a small portion of the outcomes and therefore, is perhaps not as valid as it is perceived.

> Rae: I do think there may be more of a gap between school awarded marks and diploma marks because still I find the diploma marks, despite the personal response essay, is still testing, a limited amount of your curriculum, and I used to find in the past, I'd like to have at least a fairly close mark. There were exceptions, I mean, you could always identify the students that were going to be much higher, or much lower, but overall I do think now there's going to be more of a discrepancy between school awarded marks and diploma marks just because in our curriculum. If you're trying to teach the whole thing, you are testing in far more areas. You are evaluating in far more areas I think than you did in the past, and, yeah, those students that are strong in others, non-traditional areas aren't going to be rewarded for that, but ultimately the diploma's not going to reflect that.
>
> Susan: Yeah, it's funny because in a lot of the different conversations that I've been able to have through the committees, Alberta Learning, they don't believe there needs to be that fit between.
>
> Rae: They're saying that, but I'm not sure that that's what's coming in the, you know, their evaluations, and so on that are there.
>
> Susan: Well, I think it comes down to politics.
>
> Rae: Sure it does, without question.

> Susan: So I've heard over and over again that, that Alberta Learning will say, discrepancies between school awarded mark and diploma exam mark are fine because you're testing this much more of the program, this kind of thing, but I think what happens is it, that message doesn't get through to our central offices, and it definitely doesn't get through to Simon Fraser Institute kinds of…(Rae Initial: 8-9)

The politics of high-stakes testing may limit the Program of Studies in many ways. Hillocks (2002) argues that government testing privileges the categories of writing they elect to test and marginalize those categories that are not tested. Further, when achievements are compared to other schools and publicly displayed, an imbalanced portion of outcomes can become the course. Teachers must teach what is tested and, when feeling the crunch of time, they eliminate what is not tested. In Florida, Scherff and Piazza (2005) say that specific genres of writing were utilized more frequently in grades where those genres were tested. They also note that creative genres such as poetry and personal writing might be ignored over tested genres such as expository and persuasive. Therefore, because students are required to write in prose for their personal response, fewer teachers may elect to focus instructional time on the crafting of poetry. Both Anna and Erica previously spoke of making evaluative judgments because of time constraints that occasionally exclude creative writing such as script writing and poetry.

I now realize that never once in our conversations did we discuss in detail the exam prompts, the philosophy, the criterion, the standards, or the relationship of the exam and the new program. Hillocks (2002) suggests that to really have a

critical understanding of a writing test, more than the prompt needs to be considered. He writes,

> For us to make sense of a test, we need to know not only the character of its questions, but also what counts as a right answer, and what counts for acceptable and passing performance. Other variables also make a difference in the character of a test: the time allowed, the number of questions or pieces of writing, the procedures for scoring, who does the scoring, and the feedback to teachers and students. (p. 52)

Unfortunately, our conversations sat on the surface of the exam, and failed to delve into the specifics to which Hillocks referred. Conversation five happened to be on the same day as the June administration of Alberta's diploma exam. Anna introduced the topic into the conversation with, "The exam was pretty good today, hey?" (Anna #5: 4). Anna's evaluative statement set a tone of general approval that was acknowledged by the others. Rae worried that her students' perceptions of the exam being easy may mean they were superficial in their responses. The wording of the topic and the specifics of the question were discussed but no one could remember the exact wording. Erica challenged other's memories when she asked,

> Erica: And did they not change the wording of ... I just had a glance, but I, at the reflective response it did not tell them, did not direct them to use personal experience and/or something from the…[January exam]
>
> Anna: It said prior knowledge, using, referring to the texts and referring to your prior knowledge and experience, I think is how they worded it.
>
> Rae: Okay. And I read it so quickly that I don't really remember.

Anna: Okay, I don't remember how different that was from last time.

Erica: Maybe it's not. (#5: 5)

This vague wondering was typical of the four pages of transcript from conversation #5 that centered on the exam. No one seemed to have a grasp on what was different from the January exam, the exact wording of the prompt, or the specifics of the preamble that shaped the parameters of student response. The vagueness of specific wording, topics, texts, and pictures is frustrated by the limited one-hour for perusal that teachers are granted during the exam writing. The imposed time limitation impedes analysis and inquiry that may contribute to enhanced instruction. However, in my personal experience, I never went much further than this vague analysis. I may have used the benchmark papers as exemplars and models of writing, but I rarely paid attention to the preamble the students received as instructions for meeting the requirements of the task. I did use the criterion rubrics developed to assess the students' exams for other assignments under the auspices of helping students be familiar with the form of assessment used on their diploma exam. However, I rarely took the opportunity to explore the assessment tool with my students as an instructional strategy.

In order to critically examine the effect provincial assessment has on my practice, I need to perform an analysis on the spectrum of factors contributing to the diploma exams. The nature of the writing assessments needs to be considered beside its impact on teaching. How does the exam shape beliefs and practices about the elements of writing process? Does it support process or product writing?

How does the assessment impact thinking within the classroom? Is writing seen as a culmination project or an "insight into human experience, institutions, and ways of thinking" (Hillocks, 2002, p. 199)?

Finally, for me, it is important what attitude I hold toward the assessment. Often discounted, personal attitude does contribute to the desire to ignore, meet or exceed the assessment expectations. I have often criticized the exam, but I have not thought I have the expertise to analyze the relationships of prompts, writing types, criteria, benchmark papers, and so on. Have I become one of the many teachers Hillocks (2003) believes made the assessment the theory of writing for my teaching? Hillocks argues that no expertise is required to analyze a provincial assessment and provides various questions for consideration about learning standards, writing theories, test items and prompts, scoring criterion, and benchmark responses (pp. 64-65). Historically, my students have met or exceeded the standards expected by the school division. However, this statement now has uncomfortable new surroundings and relationships creating a plethora of questions previously unexplored.

Perceptions of Statistics and Policies

The conflicted attitudes about exams are further exasperated by the popular perception that exam statistics and government policy are manipulated to express whatever whim or flight of fancy the government may have for the day, week, month or year. For example, the government published four separate diploma exam schedules for the 2004–2005 school year. The first schedule had all

diploma exams for all courses split into Part A and Part B and both parts of an exam were to be written on the same day. For ELA, that would be a six-hour exam. How would writing a six-hour exam be a reasonable expectation for students? Recently, diploma exams for other subject areas in Alberta were split into Part A, written response and Part B, machine scoreable questions, similar to the ELA diploma exam, for the benefit of students. This provided more time for written response questions and possible anticipation of broad concepts to be tested on Part B.

The perception among teachers, in both Rae's and Erica's schools, who taught in other core subject areas and had received a split exam for the first time, was that the exam was deliberately made easier so the so-called benefits for students would be observable. Rae noted, "You talk to some of the teachers who had their exam split for the first time this year, and you know, their suggestion was, yes, if they continue to make those questions easy so the results will look good, then yeah, the results will continue to look good" (Rae Initial: 11). As Rae's comments were made in her initial private interview, only she and I were privy to the previous statement that teachers in Rae's school believed the exams were unusually easy. However, in the first group conversation, when Rae mentioned her frustration with the coming year's exam schedule, Erica shared the exact same observations from other core subject colleagues at her school. These two participants had only met once before and are in different school divisions, which may possibly indicate the perception was more widely held than only a single school perception. The Alberta Teachers' Association, in their ATA News,

published an article with no author cited, suggesting that exam markers believed that the questions on the Part A of both the math and science exams were easier to administer (Diploma examinations, 2004).

> Rae: ...the justification, even for the other courses like chemistry and, and whatever, they're splitting it so the kids can do better? Well, they're on the same day.
>
> Erica: That's right.
>
> Rae: How are they split, really?
>
> Erica: And what our teachers said, for this year, because the exam was split, the exam was easier, so .....
>
> Rae: That's what they said, yes, yeah.
>
> Erica: Marks would reflect, yes, it's beneficial to split the exam in this way.
>
> Rae: Yeah, and that's what they were saying, they'll [Alberta Learning] keep it easier for a couple of years until that fades away, and then they'll do whatever they want. But I look at English, and even Social Studies where they have to write for so many hours, you know, how can they do that? I couldn't sit and write an exam for six hours. (#1: 31)

These perceptions left me wondering, "If teachers perceive that the exams and exam statistics are manipulated to reflect the image the government desires, then why are the exams so powerful within our classrooms?"

Recently, in Alberta, diploma exit exams had been secured and teachers are only provided one hour for perusal. I believe limiting teacher access to exams for critique, as diagnostic tools, or for analysis further generates mistrust between Alberta Learning and teachers. Nezavdal (2003), in an article discussing

assessment issues in Ontario, suggests that the government has failed to meet the standard of accountability they require of their teachers:

> To date, the EQAO [Education Quality and Accountability Office] has not demonstrated enough about their implementation, their methodology, and the research basis of their tests to counter the critique that there are major problems with the tests themselves. My attempts to acquire empirical support for the technical adequacy of EQAO tests have proven futile, as there are currently no provisions for public accessibility to any EQAO data beyond the test results that are annually released to the schools and media. (p. 71)

There is, perhaps, some irony found in a lack of disclosure coming from the office of accountability. With the recent securing of exams, Alberta's situation is unique but appears to have a similar policy of nondisclosure except for test results released to media, school districts and schools. Without the opportunity to critique and assess the validity of the statistical reports released to the public, these results come into question by the Alberta Teachers' Association with headlines in the *ATA News* like "Achievement tests: school improvement or statistics with sorcery?" (Podlosky, 2000). As the professional organization for teachers of Alberta, how powerful is the ATA's voice in affecting teacher perceptions of statistics related to achievement and diploma exams? Do perceptions of statistical manipulation, bias, and conflicting data influence practice?

As explained earlier, the ELA exam is in two parts: a multiple-choice portion and a written portion. In January (2004), the ELA 30-2 exam was perceived as particularly difficult. Erica suggested, "it would have been a fair 30-

1 exam" (Erica #2: 13), and Anna agreed. This began an exchange that suggested ways statistics in ELA might be manipulated.

Anna: So it'll be interesting to see if they toned it down a bit ..... because I'm sure that the results were whacked as compared to other years.

Rae: It will be very different. But you know, I look at that, too, and I think if they made the changes from one semester to another, that's particularly unfair to the kids that have written the first semester.

Erica: Well, umhm.

Susan: Yeah, that's true.

Rae: And yet it's not fair to give the second semester a really hard exam either, so…

Anna: That's right.

Rae: I don't know.

Anna: But they balance it out anyways, right, I mean, they'll, they ease off a bit sometimes on the written portion, marking on the written portion to make sure they still get that, that average.

Erica: Well, they still get the same, the same average.

Erica: Yeah, no matter what they're testing.

..... [laughter]

Rae: They still get the same average, so…

Rae: ... supposed to be above average, so…

Erica: How does that happen? I don't know when it goes, goes to the statisticians before it ever is released to any of us, you know.

Rae: You know this new school report we had to do this year was new because you had to go now and, I guess, predict what your plans are to improve your, your

standings, and so on. We're sitting there looking at it and you're thinking, "Okay, how else could they tell us everyone has to be above average than ..." You know it's just bizarre. So you sit there and you're picking, "Okay, do I say I'm going to go up by 1% next year, and then by 2%?", and then you sit and you look at your kids, and you think, "Okay, this particular group coming up, we know they're not going to be as strong, so do we say for that year we're going to go down 5%?"

Erica: That's right.

Rae: Yeah, it's just bizarre, but so you plug in some numbers, and you ship it off, and…

Susan: Well, and how, how do you always get better when you have to maintain an average?

Rae: Exactly!

Susan: I don't.

Rae: Exactly.

Susan: It seems so ludicrous, and why do they think its possible?

Rae: You got me.

Erica: Why do they think its desirable?

Susan: Yeah.

Erica: How much more pressure has to go onto these kids and…? (#4: 13-15)

From personal experience on the marking floor, I have sensed a 'tone' around standards setting. If the exam was perceived as difficult and challenging, the writing standards appear to be lower; if it was perceived as easy, then training papers for markers suggest a higher standard of writing is required to achieve the criterion. I am unaware of how standards of writing assessment are compared

across multiple semesters, years and writing prompts. How can Alberta Learning assess the validity and reliability of the assessment over time? Are teachers, researchers and the public allowed access to the implementation, the methodology, and the research basis of government tests so they can develop sound analysis and critiques? Again, this chapter is not about solutions, but rather it is preliminary exploration of personal experiences in relation to diploma exams, from which multiple inquiry questions emerge.

Questions for Inquiry

Perhaps the most important question is, "Why are we frozen in this pattern of compliance and compliant without action?" Hoffman et al. (2003) suggests, "objecting to high-stakes assessment is seen as a sign of professional weakness or incompetence" (p. 627). Kohn (2000) proposes that teachers and community actively resist and oppose standardized exams. However, Nezavdal (2003) suggests that acting to resist the standardized test 'we' know removes our situated practical knowledge from the classroom is challenging because the public perceives it as necessary to our job. It is, in fact, a part of maintaining our position. "[T]eacher resistance to such testing is politically advertised as teachers not wanting to be 'accountable.' This is an easily-sold claim when politicians have a voice that teachers lack" (Nezavdal, 2003, p. 74). There is a constant pressure to be above average. When results are good, praises are sung; when results are poor, the teaching population makes excuses.

Until these research conversations repeatedly drifted into issues and questions about examinations, I was unaware of the conflicted nature of my own attitudes, perceptions, and actions in relation to these examinations. Here, conversation has again played a vital role in interrupting my thinking, which then reshapes my actions, feeding back on my thinking and actions in new ways. The relationships between standardized testing, students, teachers, administrations and the public are extremely complex in nature.

I believe "[e]ducating students is about maximizing learning by meeting needs, by propelling passions and by nurturing human curiosity....Socially fair and just teaching must begin from the proposition that all students are always making something positive of themselves" (Nezavdal, 2003, p. 72). If I believe this, do I have a duty to reassess the role these examinations play out in the classroom? I close this chapter with a research inquiry directed mostly towards myself, but also for any reader engaged in teaching a course with a government exit exam. Consider for a moment the role the exam has played in shaping practices. Consider the strengths and weaknesses of those roles. Examine the test in its entirety rather than only in isolated observations of the prompts, rubrics or benchmark papers. Compare the writing philosophy that shapes the examination beside your personal philosophy of writing and assessment more generally. Begin your own inquiry.

CHAPTER 6

Conversations About Creation

> Students [teachers] draft and develop a variety of oral, print, visual and multimedia texts as a means of discovering, understanding and communicating their thoughts, feelings and experiences. When beginning the task of text creation, students [teachers] assess context: they determine the purpose that they wish to accomplish, they identify their audience, and they consider the nature of the communication situation. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 45)
>
> Students [teachers] develop ideas through text creation. They share their experiences and communicate the events that are significant to them. They create images and develop themes imaginatively and artistically. By creating texts in a variety of oral, print, visual, and multi media forms students [teachers] develop their personal voices and learn the craft of the text creator [curriculum/unit planner]. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 45)

Planning as Creation

When working with the new curriculum, teachers create assignments, units, overviews and course syllabi to help students achieve the specific outcomes of the course while maintaining and building outcomes from previous courses and grades (Alberta Learning, 2003b). For teachers learning a new curriculum, this process of design and creation is parallel to students' engagements with assignments for creation set by the teacher, which is why the focus of this chapter is on planning choices and concerns.

Planning as Method

Methods texts have tried to capture the complex nature of planning an English language arts program. Maxwell and Meiser (2001) suggest that careful

planning cannot eliminate all the variables affecting when and how people learn and that experience allows a teacher to cope with uncertainty rather than eliminate it. However, at the same time, method implies control and certainty. There are inherent contradictions and tensions between models, reality and experience. Each of the texts I consulted made an attempt to present the complexity of planning within a practical and pragmatic frame that is useful for teachers. For Maxwell and Meiser (2001), the principles of planning include value, appropriateness, flexibility, involvement, and assessment. Milner and Milner (2003) present four popular models of planning, which include Cain's creative-process, Applebee's conversation-based (editor's choice), objectives-based, and content-based models. Milner and Milner identify that objectives-based and content-based models are common. I suggest that each of the four models play a role in my participants' classrooms at various times and to varying degrees. Milner and Milner also suggest teachers pay attention to variables such as student, individualization, interaction, and integration, classroom organization, and sequence, variety and flexibility. On planning, Tchudi and Tchudi (1999) offer that a good unit engages the teacher, makes the teacher a learner, interests students and meets their needs, provides student choice along with rich and various material, articulates aims and expectations, and is organized. They also provide a six-step lesson plan, which is scaled down from their seven-step unit process. Returning to methods texts reminds me that there is no one fail safe model that will work every time.

Planning as Complex

Within complexity theory, planning is perceived as being prepared. There is no one model, formula or plan. Rather, the plan is designed more to prompt learning than define and prescribe learning. It requires a certain plastic, improvisational, and responsive nature. Davis et al. (2000) suggests, "teachers must be practiced and prepared but flexible and attentive to the unfolding situation" (p. 149). Imagine planning as the life-blood of a living system of the classroom, where the *relationships* of all the parts become the central guideline for preparation. Planning or preparing requires attention to the web of relationships between the curriculum on the page, the students in the classroom, the teacher, the school and the wider community. This contributes to the vast differences between classes, semesters and grades.

Complexity theory offers a different frame for the creative process of planning and implementing a new curriculum. Doll (2002), Capra (1996), and Johnson (2001) believe the central activity of all systems is to self-organize and emerge. Seeing curriculum "as a complex and dynamic web of interactions evolving naturally into more varied interconnected forms" (Doll, 2002, p. 45) shapes the curricular plan away from a linear course to be 'covered'. This conception of curriculum changes the very nature of planning. For Doll (1993), planning becomes:

> In a frame that recognizes self-organization and transformation, goals, plans, and purposes arise not purely prior to but also *from within action.* This is a key point with Dewey: Plans arise from action and are modified through actions. The two are interactive, each leading into the other and depending on the other.

> Curricularly, this translates into a course syllabi or lesson plans written in a general, loose, somewhat indeterminate manner. As the course or lesson proceeds, specificity becomes more appropriate and is worked out conjointly—among teacher, students, texts. Such conjoint planning not only allows for flexibility—utilizing the unexpected—but also allows for planners to understand themselves and their subject with a degree of depth not otherwise obtained. (p. 171; italics his)

In conversation with my participants, an organic, emergent sense of planning similar to Doll's conception was often presented with a touch of shame or guilt at not having perfectly linear lesson plans that anyone could walk in and take over in a second. General Outcome Four of the new program is the act of creation. As teachers create for implementation, they engage in an intimate personal learning experience with the Program of Studies.

Creation is an exciting outcome in the curriculum. It is 'promises to come'. Early in our phases of creation, we are still tentative explorers, working towards interpretive recursive understanding. It is so new to us that we are not confident in our choices for creation. We wonder about writing, planning and creating. 'Are we there yet?' 'Are we doing the program justice?' 'Are we reaching our students and supplying what they need?'

Planning as Creative Process

This chapter is about the theme of freedom and letting go of the lock step linear lesson plan grounded in the Tyler Rationale (Tyler, 1949). Although none of my participants, save myself, would describe their planning as a complex web of relationships that contributed to their being prepared, their descriptions often

denoted the complex nature of "laying down a path in walking" (Varela et al., 1993, p. 214) with curriculum.

Each participant approached planning for the new curriculum in a different way. Rae needed to look at the overall, big picture and identify what things were truly different and then find places within what she was already doing to integrate or tweak. For Rae, implementation started with her previous plans and then concentrated on adapting, adding and cutting. She tried to grasp the big picture and move into the details of a specific course. In Rae's words,

> I think, especially, I find the ones that were from the previous curriculum where things haven't changed, those I think are happening. What I had to sit down at the beginning of the year and do was to look at, okay, what are the changes, what are the differences, and then some of the big things, okay, which of the units am I going to fit those into. So it was more, I think, a preplanning kind of thing where I look and, and said, okay, what do I have to change? What is different this year? And I was, I suppose, most focussed on my grade 12, to make sure that I'm covering those, those main things. And then I'm looking, okay, when I get to planning the specific units I know that I have to cover this, and I have to cover this, and I have to make sure that this kind of thing they're capable of doing. So I think it was from a different perspective, kind of from a, from a bigger picture and then working down from there. (Rae #2: 2)

Erica's approach was similar, but for her it was important to grasp the exit outcomes necessary for grade 12 and then work backwards to grade 10. She credited her pilot experience with removing the struggle of scope and sequence. "Now I know where my grade twelves need to be, and I'm finding it easier to work backwards down to my elevens and tens to know what I need to do with my tens" (Erica #2: 2).

Planning for me has always been a difficult subject to discuss. I have never been very traditional, linear, organized or, for that matter, any of the things I believed were expected of me by my administration team. I have always been the 'someone' who goes to a conference and on Monday uses some element of that conference in at least one of my classes. In the past, I have attributed this to poor planning on my part. If one were well planned and organized, then she would not continually take advantage of every whim or enthusiasm to come along. In my words,

> [F]or me, my flaw in planning is the, the big picture's there, but it's really hazy, and I like to play around and whatever enthusiasm comes up for me, whatever excites me, I sort of go with. And I, I'm concerned sometimes that, that something will get missed, that maybe I'm not covering everything I need to…But I also think, in some ways, that keeps you fresh. It's… makes it sort of interesting and exciting. (Susan #2: 2)

This idea couples well with Erica's notion that she never wanted to fall into the trap of pulling out the file folder and simply making photocopies. She believed in taking advantage of new texts, ideas, or assignments.

Descriptions of planning and implementation were often contradictory in nature. While professing a desire to 'let go' on one hand, worry over what we miss also plays a role. Each participant, at some point in the conversations, expressed this contradictory tension of 'covering' a curriculum and living a complex curriculum. Rae and Anna captured this tension nicely in these statements:

> Rae: Because there isn't time. I mean, I want them to understand what they're reading. I want them to be able to think it through. I want them to be able to do a little

more with context, and that kind of stuff, but are we going to re-teach everything? There's no way. And you know what? And if they can't, you know, scan a line of poetry, does it matter? (#2: 4-5)

Anna: And it, it's that part, it's the text creation part of a new curriculum where I, and I, and I'm not, I'm not quite there, not quite doing everything simply because of that, because of the script writing. Well, where are you going to work that in? And it's a time, you know, that's a time issue as well. If, if they have to be able to write good essays, you know, good literary essays, it takes a bit of time to teach them how to do those things and get them into that. (#2: 4)

The general consensus of the group was that it would take time to work into an effective pattern, time to feel comfortable and confident with choices in planning, and time to change engrained patterns of action.

Creating Change

Rae redesigned her course structures for grade 12 and grade 11 and moved from genre to thematic approaches. While not prescribing this type of planning, the new program supports this type of planning because the new programs emphasize contextual relationships, intertextuality and interconnection between the general outcomes. An ELA teacher would never sit down and plan a General Outcome One unit on exploration, because SHELA is not designed to have a single General Outcome become a unit. Rather, each outcome would emerge through every unit. Rae, satisfied with her thematic choices, said, "I'm liking it better than I thought I might. I think I was just too traditional, but it is, it is working nicely" (#2: 3).

Thematic units are a form of planning that I have been working toward for a long time. I currently approach units both thematically and genre based. At times, my planning involves a core text surrounded with other texts that extend the theme, yet at other times I am clearly teaching the short story or poetry genre. I would not say it is fully genre or thematically based. Some units are more grounded in a genre; others are deeply invested in a theme, while still others seem to float in the middle. I shared my personal concerns and fears with switching to thematic units.

> I find that the theme units you can sort of get more things done....[Rae and Erica agree with: Yes] In, in one swoop, right, you're, when looking at a theme you can cover some of the short story, and then if you were talking about theme and symbolism there you can carry that over into the poem that you're doing for the same theme. Where I worry is, what if I miss something? What if I forget to teach, you know? (Susan #2: 3)

Perhaps moving from a genre approach to a thematic approach can be conceived as moving from the simplistic linear approach to a messy complex approach. Later in the same transcript, I returned to the idea.

> Susan: You said that you sort of are, are in transition, switching from genre and to more thematic units, I, I worry about forgetting a whole, a whole thing when I switch to the thematic unit. Like, did I, did I cover enough poetry.
>
> Rae: I know.
>
> Susan: Going through the thematic unit, whereas I know when I do the poetry I've got it, but I think it was so neat, and tight, and okay, I'm going to do my five short stories, I'm going to do this many poems, I'm going to do Shakespeare here, and it was, it was neat, it fit in a great little box, and was easy to tick off.

Rae: It is very comfortable.

Susan: Whereas thematic is not. It's not neat; it's messy.

Rae: It is, but you know, I think it works. And I mean, so far, I'm doing actually my grade twelves thematically this year, and they're not complaining except, when we got to the second unit? They said, didn't we already do short stories? So their minds are still there. (#2: 5-6)

Previous school experiences had shaped Rae's students' beliefs regarding the structures and organization of their ELA classroom. As she adopted and adapted new approaches, her students adopted and adapted new structures of school. As our practice and implementation change, they reshape our thought processes. Each new and alternate experience expands the space of possibilities available to us and to our students.

Creating the Possible

In Menzies' (2004) description of an emergent lesson for an advanced placement class, she captures the sense of possibility that opens in the specific moment of teaching. She also captures the reality of planning in a complex conception of curriculum grounded in the particular.

> I wish I could say that I had planned this activity long in advance and that I had lesson plans to match that filled five pages, outlining state objectives, theoretical underpinnings, and definitive rules for how we would pursue the sometimes difficult epic poem Beowulf. I wish I could say that I had matched this teaching experience with current brain research that clearly demonstrates how humans learn. However, I had done none of these things. (p. 70)

Anna expressed a similar observation about outcomes and planning:

> I know what is prescribed, but I don't set out to intentionally achieve every single outcome that's in there because I think, you know, you can cover a whole bunch of them, in one activity without specifically articulating to the kids, or articulating even to yourself, well, this is the thing we're doing. Some of that stuff is just going to be the natural process of conversation of formulating what you're going to write or to say…I don't, I don't feel that its too prescriptive. (Anna Initial: 9)

Mirroring Menzies' (2004) choice to spend valuable class time exploring an unanticipated outcome of an activity and Anna's observation that outcomes are achieved in the natural course of conversation, writing, reading and choices, planning for Erica and myself was an emergent process that we described as 'flying by the seat of our pants'. In contrast, Milner and Milner (2003) describe the objectives-based model with a six-step lesson plan, which includes objectives, focus, teacher input, guided practice, independent practice, and closure. It is this model that Erica and I rejected when we described our personal planning. It is not 'being unprepared'; rather it is open, flexible and responsive to the classroom context. For this, I have suffered thirteen years of guilt at not having the ideal lesson plan or the ideal unit laid out in a perfect linear sequence.

Releasing the Past

Erica described her course as, "[t]his pile of crap sitting on the table, that's my course" (#5: 42). Rae wondered, "if I ever got hit by a bus or something, and somebody had to come in and pick up, they wouldn't have a clue what to do" (#5: 42). After these statements where we admitted our perceived planning weakness, there followed laughter that I believe was grounded in knowing or understanding

a similar experiences. I know I laughed because the guilt washed away as I realized others do not have perfect laminated lesson plans that work in sequential order every time with every class either. My program is better described as potentially useful activities to be selected, adapted and rejected depending on the situation of each class. The following description of Erica's planning is incredibly familiar to my experience. It is dynamically evolving.

> Erica: I'm a real, I fly by the seat of my pants. Oh! And I don't mean that in, I, I think about things, and I, and all of a sudden it will just come to me. I will know what I want to do with something. I just sat down today, for example, and typed out the activities we're going to do for *Hamlet*, or for, sorry, for *Macbeth*, and we, they're finishing reading Act 5 today. Like, I knew what I wanted to do, kind of, but it just suddenly finally came together.
>
> Susan: Click.
>
> Rae… Yes.
>
> Erica: Type down the five things that we're going to do with this, and I'll hand it out tomorrow. I mean, I knew where we were going with it, but I just was kind of like, oh, not quite sure which activity I want to do. And I was thinking more in terms of something bigger, what did I want to do, and to be truthful I was trying to think what can we do that I don't have thirty-two papers to mark.
>
> Susan: Yeah.
>
> Erica: So we're doing a '*Macbeth* A to Z' [alphabet vocabulary assignment], they're going to do it in their groups, 'cause I'm really trying to focus on vocabulary at the moment, and so we're just going to play with vocabulary a bit. We'll do the A to Z; I've got this neat flush it out kind of thing. It's a ...its really cool, I'll have to bring it next time. It's a skeleton, it's a sketch of a skeleton and on it there's room to write various aspects of character.

Rae: Oh, yeah.

Erica: Yeah, without having to go into a huge character study, or anything like that, partly because time is becoming a bit of an issue for me.

Susan: Right.

Erica: That's how, that's the approach, I think, big picture. What do I, what do I need to accomplish? And you know, for essays I decide how many literary essays and how, how do I build to that, and then I just kind of fill in. And I change all the time, I change with each group that I have. I've never taught anything in the same order, so depending on the order in which I'm teaching things determines what I do.

Susan: Yeah, so when you're doing a thematic unit you might have to move teaching some of the figurative language to the first unit, that's where you're going to need it, and then you might not do that unit until the end the next year.

Erica: That's right.

Susan: Will you use these activities that you created today, would you think about using them next year?

Erica: Yes.

Susan: But not necessarily, you might adapt them?

Erica: You might change, I know part will be, I mean, this for, for my grade elevens, this is only the third time I've taught this course, so it really is still a new course for me and I'm still figuring out, and things are making more sense to me. I'm, I'm liking this term, how things are going, and the order is making more sense 'cause I feel like I'm actually building on something, and so, yeah, definitely some of these activities will stay with me. But part of it will depend on how they turn out with this group, and it'll depend in the future on how many kids are in a class. That really…

Rae: Yes.

Erica: It's really starting to affect things.

Susan: When you have a small group you can, you can do more difficult marking things.

Rae: Absolutely.

Susan: And you have to make different choices. (#2: 7-9)

Erica candidly shared with us elements that shaped the planning of her *Macbeth* unit. Several factors not related to the text became apparent. She felt pressed for time, both in the length of the school year and the ability to assess assignments. Because she had only taught the course on three occasions, she thought of it as still new and somewhat unstructured. The number of students also affected the types of assignments available, as well as what she thought she was capable of assessing fairly and without detriment to herself. The order of resource use she negotiated with other teachers in her school also affected her planning. Each year she may need to change the order of units, so she tried to make them relatively independent while still building on one another. Besides these concerns, she wanted to engage students in interesting and 'fun' activities with Shakespeare, while extending vocabulary and creating a non-traditional character study. She readily admitted she would use some of this year's plan next year, but prided herself on not teaching exactly the same thing two years in a row.

Changes in practice and planning are often gradual shifts that cannot be demarcated easily as definitive beginnings or endings. Rather, they occur slowly in "focusing a little more on the process rather than the end result" (Anna #5: 17), or not "handing out questions that ask specific things about a text" (Erica #5: 16).

Or in statements that recognize "I think we were concerned, too, with where we had to get them…I used to give them so much…They can get there on their own" (Rae #5: 17). Rae described a shifting, slowly and over time, from teacher centered to student centered. I suggest that this shift also moved her students into a greater position of responsibility for their learning. She no longer thought that if she did not give extensive notes her students would not be prepared. This shift toward students' need to construct their knowledge changed the types of assignments provided to the students. General questions appropriate to story structure, graphic organizers to help develop thinking, or generic novel assignments that can be used with any novel placed the emphasis on the learner's role in learning.

Curriculum as a conversation and as complex web of relationships changes perspectives on planning and implementation, making students co-creators in curriculum implementation. Standing in this paradigm is very liberating and exciting. Complexity theory examines the relationships of living learning unities and reshapes a view of planning. Rather than a static document to implement and 'cover', curriculum is emergent, responsive and flexible. I believe building in more recursion and depth and letting go of our need to 'cover' a breadth of material may be one answer to the complexity of curriculum planning. I welcome hearing other teachers express similar experiences and thoughts such as, 'I'll never get everything covered', 'just let things happen, flow, or shape themselves', and 'let plans just happen'.

Such a shift in thinking about planning for new curriculum implementation reduces the tension experienced by participants. Complexity theory informs planning by shifting the analysis to the relationships rather than discreet individual components or outcomes. The following quotation, which is when I attempted to paraphrase Anna's comments, captures the feeling that floats over planning for the new curriculum.

> Susan: In my first interview with Anna, she mentioned the fact that so many of her outcomes are covered incidentally in just the process of learning and talking and thinking and reading and writing. They just, they flow out, and you couldn't even say predict that that's what you were going to cover because they occur almost daily. (#2: 2)

This flowing and unpredictable nature of planning can frustrate or liberate depending on the stance adopted by the teacher. When the adopted stance accepts the unpredictable nature, implementation or execution of planning is a creation.

Collective Emergence

Davis and Simmt (2003) suggest that the classroom is transformed through collective projects that attend to the nature and conditions of complexity. Fenwick (2003) describes the classroom collective project as parallel to an adult education experience in:

> A workplace project, for example, is a collective activity in which interaction both enfolds and renders visible the participants, the objects mediating their actions and dialogue, the problem space that they define together and the emerging plan or solution they devise. As each person contributes, she changes the interactions and the emerging object of focus; other participants are changed, the relational space among them all changes and the

> looping-back changes the contributor's actions and subject position within the collective activity. This is 'mutual specification' (Varela *et al.* 1991), the fundamental dynamic of emergent systems constantly engaging in joint action and interaction. (p. 130)

Although I found all my research in this thesis to be generative, complexity in motion was most clearly illustrated with the following interaction I call 'The War Within Ourselves'. The idea of a collective project is captured in this particular exchange because for a few moments the entire focus of the conversation was on a project that had the potential to generate ideas for all individuals. The exchange left the realm of research and entered the realm of our classroom in action. If curriculum is a living adaptive system, then it is creative. This was highlighted for me in the fifth conversation when spontaneously an emergent dynamic of conversation led to an outline for a semester of my English 30-2 course, which, once developed, I would share with my participants. This course for me has always been very disjointed. I have experienced success with students as far as obtaining passing grades or passing exit exams. However, I have never believed that I executed the ELA 30-2 curriculum particularly well. I always thought I was grasping for any glimmer of interest shown by the students. Many of the students in this stream are not particularly academic nor do they have a love for learning. I find I jump from one idea to the next, selecting text by the size of the print and the number of pages. I have no structure or overreaching plan, just a 'clutch and grab' strategy for what might work with students who are disconnected from learning.

The Collective Event

The most success I have had with an extended text for ELA 30-2 is Elie Wiesel's *Night*. This text is short at just over one hundred pages and sparse in emotional description. The readers are left to impose their own emotions and personal reactions on the holocaust events that are presented as simple truths of one man's experience in the camps. Each participant had used *Night* in their program and was familiar with it being accessible to the average ELA 30-2 student. From here, the group started making text suggestions that might hold our student's attention. As we carried on, I expressed my desire to theme my entire ELA 30-2 course. Anna suggested a comparison between two extended texts and two different wars with different agendas and the conversation exploded from there.

> Anna: That's something we should maybe think about, Susan, because then you could even compare how the, you know, do a comparison between *Night* and *Fallen Angels*, and the two different wars, two different agendas, and yet it's still, you know, impacts people in a similar way. It might be something interesting to do.
>
> Susan: Umhm. I've been thinking about trying to get, capture some theme for the 30-2 because I'm, I'm always all over the map. I'm always trying to find something that'll be exciting, or interesting, or engaging, and, and I never seem to hit on it, but maybe if there was, maybe if we did a theme like that, or maybe they'll get their Social Studies. (#5: 22)

We explored the possibility of using a theme from a social studies topic to assist students with prior background knowledge that is critical to engagement with text. A suggestion was made to work from a topic in grade 10 rather than grade 12 because, in a semestered school, students may take English

before social studies, thus defeating the purpose of some pre-established background knowledge. Anna suggested a theme that may work as a course theme for ELA 30-2.

Anna: Even, like, the 'War Within Ourselves', or something, so you could talk about, you know, actually talking about the external process of war, but then talk about how things happen in your life that, changes you.

Susan: Yeah. That's an amazing theme....

Anna: Even make that the theme. Like I know, I've heard what's his name, the textbook guys, David and...?

Rae: Oh, yeah, Crick. No.

Anna: No. The other, John Wolls, I think is his name, and he said he picks one, he has one theme for the whole year.

Anna: They all only deal with things that connect with that somehow, maybe that's an approach worth trying.

Susan: But they're big, broad themes.

Anna: Yeah.

Susan: Almost anything can fit in.

Rae: Almost anything, but even that little short story, I think it's in a couple of different texts, but its called "War", actually, and its, is it.

Anna: Timothy Findley.

Rae: Timothy Findley, it is, too.

Rae: Yeah, and I mean, that's accessible to almost anyone, grade 10 or grade 11, or whatever, and that's kind of nice starting point, too.

Erica: And "On the Rainy River". Have you read that one?

Anna: No.

Erica: Tim O'Bryan. It's in the *Imprints Twelve.*

Rae: Oh, okay.

Erica: It's an amazing short story, just, and its partly autobiographical. He had to choose whether or not he was going to become, whether he was going to go to war, Vietnam, or if he was going to come to Canada and be a draft dodger.

Rae: Oh, okay.

Erica: And its about that, that whole experience of choosing, and it's a really good short story that 30-2 would be fine with, 30-1, we use it now, and it's actually one that they could write about on the Diploma, its got enough to it, and its long enough that there's, but it's a, again another one that's really good.

Anna: 'Cause you could get into speech …now I'm really thinking about .....

Susan: Yeah, yeah, I'm ..... [several talking] [excitement at the ideas flowing]

Erica: I know. I know....

Anna: Where's my pen and paper?

Susan: We've got it on tape..... [all together and overlaid]

Erica: We can have a whole course planned here by the time we're done.

Anna: Get into some speeches, you know, and look at speeches by certain political leaders .....

Susan: Patton or….

Rae: And even protest poetry..

Susan: Yeah.

Rae: ...music songs, you bring in some Dylan, or whatever...

Anna: That's right, ... modern, you know, modern, you know, like your Marilyn Mansons who are, you know, anarchists in a lot of senses and maybe do some of that kind of stuff. [overlaid yeahs]

Erica: Yeah.

Susan: *Bowling for Columbine* has a great interview with Marilyn Manson, and he, I think, made the most bloody sense of everybody in the show!

Erica: I know! ... [several talking] I was stunned when he was talking actually.

Susan: And he's really articulate. You, I mean, you could take that clip, or you could show the *Bowling for Columbine*, there's nothing that's overtly violent. (#5: 23-5)

This staccato exchange occurred in fewer than five minutes, but it became more than the sum of the participants. Ideas bounced and reflected off one another as one statement led to another idea. There was a creative energy in the air that demanded our attention and focused our topic. There was a verbally expressed desire to hold onto the possibilities that were being generated. The shaping of this possible theme would look very different as each participant grabbed texts and ideas from the conversation and shaped them into her own possibilities, but the space of the possible was greatly expanded. This was five minutes of exactly what I hoped to accomplish with the conversation group. Although I could not predict or plan for the event, by attending to the condition of complexity, the occasion emerged and the collective project unified and focused the group.

Framing the event through complexity.

In relation to complexity theory, and Davis and Simmt's (2003) example of a self-organizing collective, the exchange met the conditions necessary for an emergent collective of learners. Redundancy was present in our knowledge of the curriculum, the texts that were common to our experiences and the types of possible assignments we have asked our students to complete. We shared years of experience in the same subject. Similar marking experiences existed where conversation about texts and activities were shared and taken home to try in our own adapted way. One of the important redundancies we shared in conversation five was that of our previous four conversations. During the last two months we had met every two weeks to converse about our experiences. We shared failures, successes, risks, weaknesses and strengths. Even though three of us worked for the same division, only two of us had more than a passing familiarity and that had been absent during the present school year. The conversation experience had shaped and created a space where our redundant qualities and knowledge were somewhat assumed and our individual diversities could make appearances in a safe space. We all knew we taught *Night* and that it was a successful text. What we needed now was experiences outside of our individual environment.

Diversity was most obviously present in the wider range of texts made available for the consideration of the participants. Authors, titles, and textbooks were suggested. Typically, when one person was stretching to remember the author of a story, another participant could supply the information, whether or not they utilized the text within their program. For example, the idea using *Fallen*

Angels as a novel study for ELA 30-2 had been previously abandoned by me, as I deemed the text too difficult. Hearing that success was experienced at the sister school in our division had me reconsidering my original veto of the text. This exchange only captured the texts for possible study, not the texts for creation. In the fashion of conversation, a new topic diverted the collective's attention to media in the classroom. The collective experience also arose from Anna's experience at ELAC convention where she first encountered and suggested the idea of a central unified theme for an entire course. Other diversities existed in the consideration of split classes, such as Rae experienced. Now, while these two conditions of redundancy and diversity are necessary for emergence, they are always present to some varying degree. They may need to be attended to as I did when designing the research study, but they are present in most social groupings.

Neighbouring interactions, however, require ideas to interact with each other in public spaces, be they written or oral exchanges. In this case, the predominate form of interaction was conversation. Neighbouring interactions are where diversity and redundancy exist in an appropriate balance, privileging neither one and allowing for the exploration of knowing. Ideally, neighbouring interactions need to be represented in some fashion so they can be drawn on repeatedly as iterations of ideas are shaped and reshaped in the conversation. Participant's desires to record ideas represented illustrates the importance of recording ideas for future reference. As the individual who listened repeatedly to the exchange, I have a strong desire to enact the ideas.

Decentralized control is the idea that no one unity controls and dictates the emergence of the learning community. The conversations, although not dominated by my voice, were peppered with my questions. Undeniably, my research agenda was the reason for the collective experience. As the unofficial leader of the learning collective, I was looked to for a starting position, for guiding questions, or new directions when topics were exhausted. However, no one participant held or dominated the floor. Each participant felt free to contribute her ideas, and to let them be reshaped and adapted by any other speaker. The conversation led the participants to where it wanted to go. Just as any conversation seems to direct its attention, this one did, too, as it shifted to approaching media in other grades. Many possibilities and directions remain unexplored.

The condition of enabling constraints defines the space of the possible. It shapes what can be done, by establishing what cannot be done. In a one-hour conversation without textbook access, we could only suggest texts from memory. The focus was on an ELA 30-2 program. As a group we shared some knowledge and experiences in relation to the 'typical' student of an ELA 30-2 program. The theme possibility was determined as 'The War Within Ourselves' and texts were needed to reflect some element of the theme. Conventionally, constraints are seen to limit options and narrow alternatives, but empirically constraints can create new possibilities while closing off other possibilities. Juarrero (2002) suggests, "[s]ome constraints must therefore not only reduce the number of alternatives: they must simultaneously create new possibilities" (p. 133). There are literally

hundreds of short stories and thousands of poems available to an ELA teacher at the senior high level; but by grounding our conversation in one theme in a particular course, we limited the number of texts possible, making presented texts appropriate to the context and potentially useful for consideration.

Additions, absence, cautions and further considerations.

Listening to the tape over and over still excites me as I hear the excitement in our voices, the overlapping of ideas, the moments taken to catch a breath and the desire to preserve the experience. However, the planning in ELA often initially revolves around the selected texts. This exchange supplied a wealth of ideas, some outside my experience, while others were within my experience. It generated ideas that alone I never would have conceived, such as the protest poetry suggested by Rae and the use of speeches suggested by Anna.

Although the issue of justifiable violence in "Bowling for Columbine" is mentioned, other issues did not emerge. The complex issues of gender and war literature, of psychological "spins" on "The War Within Ourselves", and of values present and absent did not present themselves in the conversation. There was no mention of racial identity, multicultural texts, or, for that matter, consideration of female students' perspectives. Such macro-complexities also fuel what units are designed and taught. Further, the conversation also did not generate assignments and ideas for text creation. As noted earlier, text creation is most noticeable by its limited nature or its absence in conversation. Here, too, the conversation did not produce tangible ideas, observations or possibilities for text creation. This absence

of concrete examples of text creation ideas is also part of the reason I chose to ground *Chapter 6 – Conversations About Creation* around curriculum planning as an act of creation.

The excitement of the previous exchange led me to follow it up in the final private conversations with each participant. I harboured a desire to identify some concrete strategies, assignments and structure in the possible theme. The follow up conversations, although generative, were not as powerful as the original conversation. Perhaps it was time, distance and space from the original conversation. Perhaps it was simply the end of a long school year and a slow down in creative energy. Perhaps it was the lack of multiple voices to extend and energize the conversation. If ever an opportunity was to present itself, I should like to present the transcripts, play the original conversation and each of the individual conversations to the collected group and see what might arise.

Extensions to the selected texts were limited with Rae. Perhaps this is because she is the most isolated of all participants. She has taught senior high ELA for twenty years on her own and would have limited experiences with collaborative planning. Perhaps my question about when she taught her next 30-2 class irreversibly changed the course of the conversation. For whatever reasons, she only suggested one more text, *The Suspect* by Wright, as an internal struggle. She saw potential in the theme overall. "I mean, 'The War Within,' you know, whether you're dealing with something specifically focussed on external war as well, or whether you're just talking about any kind of a decision, or a struggle, or

a dilemma it certainly fits" (Rae Final: 14). Her contribution reminds me to build and focus on both the internal and the external struggle.

Anna, on the other hand, provided suggestions, starting points, texts and structures. Perhaps this is the familiarity of working together for seven years with varying levels of collaboration. Perhaps she felt more ownership as the one who suggested the theme and provided the impetus for the initial conversation. Perhaps it is the notion that teaching next door to one another made the creation and implementation more realistic. Or perhaps the comfortable home environment simply stirred more ideas. Whatever the reason, our final conversation carried on over twelve pages of transcript. It moved around, starting with more texts for consideration while considering a balance of internal and external conflicts. Anna and I shared our dissatisfaction with our approach to 30-2 and found a possible solution emerging out of our conversation.

> Anna: You know, they don't, I don't know if they always feel that dilemma, but there's got to be some, something that we can really fire it up because I don't like, I just don't like how I teach 30-2.
>
> Susan: Me either.
>
> Anna: I don't, I feel.
>
> Susan: I feel like it's disjointed.
>
> Anna: It is.
>
> Susan: That its, there's no interconnections, right, there's no sustained conversation that goes over the whole semester where they, where the students can, you know, start with a germinating idea and, and have that build through the different pieces of text, and particularly with those guys since they don't like reading, I think when we're not helping them to draw connections, you

know, they read a piece of text and it disappears, and they're going to need them for the diploma exam that they're required to include literature in their essays.

Anna: Umhm. It has to be, it has to be about issues. We have to build the whole thing around issues.

Susan: Okay.

Anna: I think because if there are issues that somehow they can get into. (Anna Final: 17-8)

Anna's epiphany that the course needs to be designed around issues was grounded in a recent, powerful classroom experience. In the first semester, as the graduation coordinator, she dealt with the issue of whether or not the graduation dance should serve alcohol. She described the speech writing assignment she assessed from the students as "those were the best arguments I have ever heard out of those kids, and they were logical, well thought out, and they were researched in some senses" (Anna Final: 18). The difficulty lies in finding issues that impassion the students in the same way as this local issue had.

Anna's suggestions ranged into various genres including film, non-fiction, essays, poems and other genres. She suggested returning to journal writing for readers' response. This is something both of us have tried and abandoned on different occasions. Perhaps with a central theme unifying the course and selected writing prompts, the journal experience will be more rewarding for both the students and us. Her suggestions for assignments included photo collages of 'the war within us' and what they perceive is their life and what they want it to be, or stock bodies (generic paper cut outs) where students illustrate their conception of themselves and their conflicts.

The conversation with Anna reflected a collective learning engagement, whereas the conversation with Rae was very limited in its creativity. The initial experience was grounded in time and place, which is never replicable. For whatever reasons, efforts to continue the conversation were limited and different.

Conclusion

Complexity theory embraces the notion that failure is specific to an environment and therefore something that, failed once, may succeed under different circumstances. It also recognizes that the planning and execution of this theme may work for only one of us, neither of us, or all of us, this year but not the next year. The complexity of the classroom encourages a loose plan that adapts to the environment provided by the physical space, the curriculum, the students and the teacher. It requires deep personal connections with a subject and a curriculum. I used many of the suggestions that arose from our conversations about 'The War Within Ourselves', when I structured my ELA 30-2 course for 2005. *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers worked particularly well beside *Night* by Elie Wiesel. I have not yet incorporated protest songs or speeches but intend to include them. When I consider planning for 2005–2006, I refer to the transcripts and consider possible activities within particular context and particular learners. For me, the professional conversation group created new opportunities, relationships and worlds. In Wright's (2001) words,

> I feel I have been changed by the process. The people I met, the ideas I conceived, the further opportunities I gained as a result of the work are a part of this change. This is sufficient to suggest that, in the language of

> Maturana and Varela, autopoietically, through the experience of Formwork [professional conversation group], I have found congruence in new relationships. I have come to participate differently in a world that has changed (p. 269).

Chapter 6 – Conversations about Creation continues the understanding that to be teachers of a curriculum we must first be students of it. As each participant moves through creating units and planning, her choices and actions are influenced by her experiences and her world changes. Hopefully, these conversations contributed to her creations.

CHAPTER 7

Conversation as an Implementation 'Vehicle'

> As students [teachers] collaborate with others, they use language to show respect and consideration. Together, students [teachers] access, understand, use and create texts in seeking answers to questions regarding the human condition. They appreciate the diversity of expression, opinion and perspective displayed by others in their community of learners, and they willingly share their personal knowledge, expertise and perspectives to help build and strengthen that community. They learn to use language in ways that demonstrate sensitivity to the feelings of their peers and enrich the classroom atmosphere. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 63)
>
> Students [teachers] learn collaboration skills by working well together. They discuss in groups, build on others' ideas, and plan and work together to meet common goals. (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 63)

Professional Lives – Respect, Support and Collaborate

General Outcome Five weaves the six language arts, and the five outcomes together in order to "respect, support and collaborate with others" (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 63). The web of relationships between individuals, curriculum, texts and teachers provides support for text exploration, study, management and creation. As students of the curriculum, teachers "come to understand their connections to community in a broader sense" (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 63). Langer (2002) identifies six characteristics of teachers' professional lives in schools with effective literacy programs. She reminds the reader that all six characteristics work in connection; they are as follows:

1. coordinating efforts to improve achievement
2. fostering teacher participation in professional communities

3. creating activities that provide teachers with a sense of agency
4. valuing commitment to professionalism
5. engendering caring attitudes
6. fostering respect for learning (p. 65)

Although Langer's (2002) research is about urban and suburban sites, I believe a rural teacher's professional life also requires the six traits. In large school boards there is often an infrastructure, which may include specialty consultants, department heads and teacher leaders, that contributes to establishing professional communities and coordinated efforts. However, the meeting of all six requirements may be more challenging due to situational constraints of limited numbers of teachers with specific and similar expertise and programs. Within the sample school division three of my participants worked for, there are no consultants, no department heads with official duties and time allotted, and only ten teachers teaching high school ELA across a geographical area of two hours driving time. Recently, the AISI project previously discussed, created a community of teachers interested in literacy improvement. This project comes with two lead teachers whose time is divided between their own classrooms and supporting other divisional teachers. The project is only two years old. How can teachers in rural communities better enhance their professional lives and practice when they work in relative isolation? In my experience, rural teachers often have limited experience with collaborative communities because of their contexts and therefore must actively seek community to support their implementation of a new curriculum and more generally to support their professional growth.

A Vehicle for Implementation

An epiphany of personal understanding regarding the new curriculum emerged for me during the second-last, private interview of the entire research project with Erica. I needed countless conversations, including all those before my research commenced, all those directly resulting from the research, and all those in between, to bring forth this understanding. In many ways, it was what I unconsciously knew and lived, both in and out of the classroom, in relation to learning. It is the reason my methodology is one of conversation with a filter of complexity theory. General Outcome Five with its emphasis on collaboration, support and respect is the supporting network binding learning together into a collective experience. Due to my experience and understanding, I stated, "GO 5, it isn't an outcome for me, it's the vehicle" (Erica Final: 4) to the other outcomes. Each individual constructs his or her own understanding, but it is through the collaborative, supportive and respectful environment with other learners that one enhances personal insight.

Doll also believes community is central to curriculum. Within Doll's (2002) five C's of curriculum: currere, complexity, cosmology, conversation and community, community is the 'organizing glue'. It is what we have in common; it nests us in layers of culture, ecology and cosmology. When planning the structure of my thesis, I considered starting with outcome five, and the idea of community, collaboration, support and respect, because I had come to understand it as necessary to a learning classroom and a professional conversation group. I felt that without the binding nature of General Outcome Five, the other outcomes

could not be met. However, the circular nature of the outcomes leads me to the conclusion, that for clarity, I would maintain the organization and structure of the program of studies in my discussion.

Building a professional conversation group to think about my and others' experiences with a new program is building a collaborative community that respects and supports learning. To investigate the experiences of these women, there was first a phase of exploration, which began in the initial private conversations and continued into the initial group conversations. The conversation group evolved over the course of the five conversations. As comfort levels grew and experiences were shared, the supportive network intertwined, allowing individuals to express personal observations about failings, risks and insecurities. The conversation group's participants showed a candid willingness to explore their practice, question their practices or choices, and discuss their failures, insecurities and risks, revealing the rich data I believe they provided. As the community built stronger relationships, responses and insights to the program deepened and evolved. Attitudes, beliefs and practices were explored in relation to the structure of diploma exams. Creation, solutions and possibilities emerged from neighboring interactions, decentralized control and enabling constraints.

The three women who assembled for the conversation group all, like me, valued conversation in their learning. Various conversations generated ideas for practice, clarified personal understanding, created new understanding, generated solutions, validated choices, practice, and actions, provided impetus to change and removed a sense of insecurity. In answer to my question, "How does conversation

fit into your personal growth?" Anna replied "It's the whole basis of it for me" (#5: 28). Rae relied on it "almost exclusively" (#5: 28). Erica summed up how she valued conversation with "it saves so much time and so much energy to have a conversation about something and it just sparks ideas" (#5: 33).

As Feldman (1994) notes, much of what teachers learn about teaching is gained through conversations with other teachers in multiple communities of practice including schools, divisions, regional meetings, workshops, and inservice. These community interactions become a significant source of knowledge, ideas, validation, and solutions.

Conversation as Ideas

'Ideas' was a common theme when considering the value of conversations to professional growth and implementation. Rural teachers are isolated and have limited access to other specialists. Creative energy only goes so far without perturbations. Providing varied and interesting activities to each class is challenging. Erica stated, "You can't generate everything and when you work on your own and you teach…all the English classes you can't have something different all the time. You cannot physically and mentally create that many things" (Erica Initial: 6). For her, conversation sparked creativity and expanded her program.

Rae liked "the ideas. I like to hear what people are doing. I like to hear what's happening out there because sometimes it affirms what you're doing, and sometimes you think, 'you know what? I better try a different approach' " (#5:

33). As the only senior high ELA teacher in her school, she had no other experience to hear about. As often as possible, she sought conversations through diploma exam marking; however, she still worried about "plodding along" (#5: 33). She saw exam marking as an opportunity to make contacts, and interact "because when you're the only one in the school, it really does make a difference, and yeah, you're in isolation unless you, you know, get out there to these things" (Rae Initial: 12). However, in the complex web of relationships, Rae's responsibilities also included career counselling and administration as the assistant principal. The demands on her time limited her access to conversations about ELA while simultaneously placing her in various other conversations.

Second hand conversation and experiences also generated ideas for the group. During conversation #2, Anna referenced a personal conversation she had with a respected presenter, John Wolls, at an English Language Arts Conference. She had asked how he was approaching the personal response to text assignment on the diploma exam. The assignment called for a response in prose, but occasionally a student may prefer to create a poem. Anna asked how he dealt with the issue and her retelling of his response was shared with us:

> Well, I was talking to John Wolls about this at, at the ELAC conference…"I'm just interested to know how are you getting your kids to do that reflective response." And he said, "well, you know, I mean, I'm encouraging them to use different forms, and I'm telling them if they're comfortable with the traditional method do that." And I said, "Well, what about this thing, you know, where they want to write a poem?" And he said, "Well, get them to put the poem in the context of something else." So they say, you know, that… this piece of literature makes, you know, these pictures make me think of this idea and, and for me this comes out in some lines from this poem that I've

> written, so that if they have a poem within the context of something that's prose. He said that there were a couple of examples. (Anna #2: 29)

Anna's conversation with another colleague entered our conversation as a possible solution to student work or ideas that do not fit within the traditional diploma exam structure. Rae, during her January marking experience, had noted that poems were marked as legitimate personal responses to text, and that verified his suggestion. Students were to be rewarded for the quality of their response rather than strictly the form.

New knowledge and ideas for the conversation group were most notable in the discussion of the new novel list approved by Alberta Learning. I had forgotten and Rae was completely unaware that the novel list was under review. Once the novel list was introduced into the conversations, it became a running theme that included practice validation, idea generation, questioning and challenges to shape planning. The new list generated conversations about the novels themselves, but also about approaches to instruction.

Conversation as Validation

A new Program of Studies requires change, and some of that change can create insecurity, and discouragement for experienced teachers. Experimentation and risk taking with new teaching strategies and pedagogies may undermine an individual's confidence (Darling-Hammond, 1997). However, teachers who either seek or are surrounded by learning communities where they are supported and encouraged are more likely to embrace significant change. Membership in

professional conversations outside of an individual's classroom or school helps to situate the daily experience of a changing Program of Studies within a larger community where old ideas may be let go as new ideas are incorporated (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Langer, 2002).

Within this realm of conversation, there were several themes such as 'letting go', and 'failing to cover' that emerged for the participants. The theme of 'letting go' resurfaced often and provided validation that each participant was not alone in her experience. Each participant described 'letting go' of different ideas once valued. For example, Anna still used the lesson of scanning a poetry line; for her, the activity was important because it engaged students in studying a wide variety of poems and poetic forms. Erica and Rae no longer, if ever, included this activity in their classrooms. On the issue of traditional canon, Anna held more to traditional texts while Erica set aside many traditional works, such as *Lord of the Flies*.

Rae 'let go' of needing to have a perfect product for the classroom and accepted that implementation was a process that required years of adaptation, discarding and additions. She pondered, "[i]f it takes a couple of years to get this worked into a nice pattern, is it the end of the world?" (Rae #2: 3) She believed a new program required at least three years of time and attention, during which time she adjusted her perceptions and actions as things fall together. The struggle to view implementation as a process rather than a deliverable product was echoed by other participants in their conflicted experiences and worries about forgetting to teach something or not attending to all the outcomes. For me, the conflict lies in

switching from genre units to thematic units, which I have referenced before in conversations about planning. The validation of my 'letting go' was through hearing other teacher's stories of similar yet different experiences. Simultaneous to validation, solutions were suggested to alleviate worries about adequately 'covering' a literary genre's conventions. Anna suggested "having a genre approach in grade 10…is the way to go, and you can get into themes in English 20 and 30 because you know that they have the same basic understanding of poetry form, and short story theory, and all the theory" (#5: 35). Utilizing both a genre and thematic approach to unit planning within the sequence of senior high courses may provide common background and experience to build on in grade 11 and 12, where the thematic connections and relationships of ideas would be more important. This possible solution alleviated fears of not adequately providing theoretical understandings for individual genres while still emphasizing thematic connections and context.

Also related to the theme of 'letting go' was the ability to accept failure. When Erica outlined a new and creative approach to her final exam, she accepted that it might be a "total bomb" (#5: 3). This freed her to take a risk with an assignment that she might not otherwise have taken. As the definition of text broadens and the genres of text students are expected to create broadened, my participants felt it necessary to 'let go' of teaching each and every genre that it is possible to create. Erica confidently announced, "I don't have to teach how to write every different kind of writing… they can find the information out" (#2: 4). This attitude emerged out of necessity of time and a shift in learning

responsibility. This is partially the new curriculum's influence and partially epistemological changes in the understanding of knowledge and learning. As epistemologies about constructed knowledge become more clearly understood and embedded into ELA curriculum, teaching stances shift, slowly altering practice.

Tchudi and Mitchell (1999) argue that curriculum as a noun needs to become a verb, which is seen as dynamic and changing. Instead of a thing to be 'covered', it becomes a set of relationships and activities to be lived, a process instead of a product. Doll (2002) invokes Pinar's notion of currere in his five C's of curriculum. Currere, 'to run', can attend to the noun as course or object to be run or the verb, in running of the course as a process of personal transformation. Curriculum in this way must "interact with the text of life" (p. 50).

Perhaps the slow reshaping and reconsidering of curriculum will erode the insecurities that treat curriculum as an object to be completed. Each participant had at least eight years of experience; in fact, three had more than thirteen years of experience. Still, there was a slight insecurity associated with 'covering the curriculum'. Erica clearly outlined her fears in the following passage:

> I think one of the biggest things from our conversations was the whole idea of becoming more comfortable with what I can realistically accomplish in a class, and if I can't get something done, not the end of the world. If I have time to try something… great. And that was something really important for me because I've always felt so obligated to get things done, and if I do something in one class in this semester, then I feel I should be able to do it in the next class, in the same class in the next semester, and that just didn't happen this year, and I'm okay with that, which is probably the first time that I felt, that it's all right not to have everything exactly the same, and it was a way of looking at curriculum in a different way, you know, from what you said that, the curriculum was a starting point not

> our end point, which, you know, makes, you have to step back and take a look at what's actually there, and overall look at what do I want to accomplish, what do I want my students to walk away from. (Erica Final: 2)

Conversation can validate individual action in the classroom by removing the isolation and thus remove the fear of inadequacy, and to hear about experiments, successful or otherwise. While the specific examples provided here of this sense of insecurity about practice are from Erica and myself, they were echoed in Anna and Rae's voices as well.

> Erica: I think we've all had the same experiences. It was so amazing listening to what [end of side one, flipped tape over to side two] the same kinds of, how do I approach this, and, and I can't do this because I don't know how to do this, so, I don't know how to do this, I don't. And, yeah, it was really interesting, and what was also neat is that everyone has started exploring, you know, new ideas, new ways, and you know, there were four different permutations for everything that happened…
>
> Susan: And yet similar.
>
> Erica: That's right.
>
> Susan: So, different, different things.
>
> Erica: Yes.
>
> Susan: But similar veins, similar… similar ideas.
>
> Erica: Yes, I just thought that was really interesting.
>
> Susan: I think it validates what you're doing so that you, you regain that confidence that you can sometimes lose in the isolation of your classroom. There's, there's nobody there who, who knows if you're doing it right or… I know I felt like I fake it.
>
> Erica: Yeah.

Susan: And starting to think, no I don't, I don't fake it, I know probably as much as anybody else out there.

Erica: Yeah, yeah.

Susan: Its…but you're so isolated where you can't judge when you have nothing to compare it to.

Erica: I think what's important from all that, is that there isn't a right way to do it, that, you know, there were four of us in that room all doing something similar, but yet doing it in different ways, and all being effective. And so I think that takes away some of that anxiety of, have I got right? (Erica Final: 18-19)

As Smith (1999) believes that, regarding hermeneutic interpretations, an individual always interprets others from a frame of common language and experience reflecting then, that, "whatever I say about you is also saying about myself" (p. 42). This need to see that others are experiencing similar yet different experiences with the new Program of Studies validated that we were not alone in our thinking or in our struggles and contributed to confidence. Sharing that we have all needed to let go of some aspect of former practice we valued allowed us to see our practice as evolving. At some point in the research, each participant suggested a fear of not 'covering the curriculum', which validated that it is not only 'me' experiencing this situation, fear or problem. Validation alone is not enough; an individual must seek to act on this recognition in order to change practice. However, validation is an important starting point for seeking change.

Conversations as Solutions

Assessment.

Conversations provided creative solutions to concerns such as marking. I shared with the conversation group a peer assessment activity, which evolved out

of piloting conversations. The marking load of ELA teachers can be overwhelming. I am continually searching for new but authentic ways to assess students. Ideally, assessment should supply opportunities for growth. The following description is about ELA grade 11 students peer-assessing essays against rubrics:

> Susan: …It took two days, so two hours of their time, and we did, we talked about what, what these marks would look like. We read over some sample papers that I had pirated with black, black listed names, and that kind of thing, and then they, we did one whole one together where they had to mark it against what I was doing, and they had to really think about their descriptors, and things, and then they each marked three papers, or four, I can't remember if it was three or four papers. So everybody was responsible for marking four papers, and when they were done they had seen five or six student papers. They saw that whole range of possibilities of what this essay could look like, and they had a better concept, I think, of what 3's, 4's, 5's looked like, and it was, it was sort of a tough slogging to get through it, but I think very worthwhile in the end, and then they also understood what marking it was like, and how you can really defend what, what you're saying, or how you have to be paying attention, and know what you're writing. And they saw good writing, you know, they would see some 90's, and they would see that disorganized 40% that they're going, this makes no sense! How can somebody write this? Well! Hm.
>
> Erica: One of you did.
>
> Susan: Yeah.
>
> Susan: So ..... I'd done it, I'd…they had to put a title page on them, so then they could rip that cover off, and so then they were just numbered, number papers so they were anonymously marked, like they would at a diploma exam. (#2: 9-10)

The students treated the project I shared with the group very seriously and, in general, the average marks attributed to each paper were similar to my assessments of students' work. The activity lifted some of the burden of my marking, but more importantly, deeply engaged the students in examining the rubric, broadening their experiences of interpretation and assessing their personal writing with new perspectives. Interestingly, this solution was first shared with me in piloting conversations, and then my adaptation of the activity was shared with my participants. The recursive nature of conversations and feedback provides wider and wider circles of colleagues with possibilities.

Vocabulary.

Other solutions explored through conversation included vocabulary instruction. One of the key elements arising from the AISI project in our division is the nature of authentic vocabulary instruction. For the most part, our experience had taught us that the list of vocabulary words was not an adequate solution to expanding vocabularies. Graves and Watts-Taffe (2002) describe word consciousness as an important element in student vocabulary acquisition. They suggest a variety of strategies from the informal to the formal, which includes teacher modeling, intensive instruction, and word play. The conversation wanders into various games that play with language such as: Mad Gab, where the spelling of other words sound phonetically like common sayings when said with appropriate speeds and breaks, or Boggle, which is a letter combination game to determine maximum number of words in a random combination of letters. The games are suggested as fun and interesting ways to engage reluctant students in

vocabulary development. Erica reminded us that vocabulary is not simply a school activity; it is central to any learning we do and, as such, the games should not just be for the reluctant, but "even for 20-1's" (#2: 16). Anna further suggested using computers to play the vocabulary games. This then prompted discussions on computer access and computer literacy related to reluctant students. During our AISI experience, Ida, our facilitator consultant for the division, shared a statistic that the best indicator of a grade 11 student's vocabulary is the vocabulary the student arrived with in grade one. Supporting Ida's comment is Graves and Watts-Taffle's (2002) statement that "vocabulary knowledge is one of the best indicators of verbal ability (Sternberg, 1987; Terman, 1916)" (p. 141). Our conversation wandered into the personal experiences the group had encountered with young children just learning language. I shared my experience of watching my niece acquire language. Rae shared her experience regarding concerns of over dialect and accents, while Anna shared her friend's story of a father having a speech impediment that his children seem to have acquired. This lead us back to the concerns of improving limited vocabulary for students who arrive in our classrooms with very rigid and set patterns of speaking and attitudes about vocabulary.

Planning.

A third example of a solution explored through conversation is directly related to teaching ELA in a rural setting. For Rae, every school year required different planning because her student numbers dictated different splits and course combinations. For one year she may have an ELA 10-1 and ELA 10-2 as a

combined class, but the next year student numbers may warrant that the ELA 10-1 and 10-2 be separate classes. What this meant for her in a practical sense was that she could rarely ever mimic a plan from the previous year. One solution Anna suggested that had worked for both ELA 20-1 and ELA 20-2 in a combined situation was her *Lord of the Flies 'Survivor'* unit, which examined group dynamics and interrelationships.

> I should flip you the, our survivor unit for *Lord of the Flies* 'cause its something a little bit different, you don't spend so much time hashing out what did each of the boys do. They have their, they have, they get into groups and they do five different challenges and, and then they have to do some, some self-assessment, how did our group get better, or what are our strengths, and then they're, the basis is sort of deciding are you a narcissist or an altruist… And it, like we've done it with the 20-2's and they seem to like it as well because not so much just focussing on reading, they, they keep thinking, okay, do we have a challenge tomorrow? You know, and they get together and, and do that. (Anna #5: 38-39)

What started as a solution for combined classes eventually revealed an alternative possibility for both Erica and me. Neither of us enjoys teaching the novel *Lord of the Flies*. However, when I have used Anna's unit designed for *Lord of the Flies* with my classes, they have been more engaged and interested in the process of understanding group dynamics. The unit "really has been an interesting way of looking at the group dynamics because more and more we are interdependent" (Susan #5: 39). I really enjoy and value the premise of the unit, but do not appreciate the novel to which it is attached. Erica saw the possibilities of detaching it from the specifics of the novel and rebuilding it as a challenging experience for the class, as a generic novel unit adapted to suit a variety of novels,

or as a teambuilding activity grounded in metacognition and used early in the semester.

> Erica: Can you just do it as a, a challenge, like a metacognitive kind of exercise? with, 'cause I'd kind of like to get from you 'cause it sounds really neat, and I'll have something fun to do as, ...as something that can stand on its own, yeah.
>
> Anna: Even at the beginning of the semester.
>
> Erica: Yeah.
>
> Anna: A teambuilding thing, that would .....
>
> Erica: Yeah, actually that's a neat idea. [several talking]
>
> Anna: Without even talking about the literature at all.
>
> Erica: That's right. (#5: 40)

Repeatedly, ideas slid into conversation only to be adapted by the listeners to suit individual purposes and needs. Each participant hearing an idea adapted, adjusted and manipulated it to suit personal philosophies, tastes, texts, and choices, which are all affected by where she was in the implementation process.

Conversations as Professional Development

Shaping Practice

Conversations have shaped my practice in many ways, sometimes directly through the conversation, and yet other times only on reflecting on the conversations. All the participants valued conversation. However, different levels of social systems assess the value of teacher talk differently. Anna stated that while teachers value conversation as professional development, the general public

might be more skeptical or cynical. With regard to government accountability, conversations centered on "what it is we do…would be too hard to quantify" (Anna Initial: 11). Further, conversations have a way of meandering around topics rather than linearly traveling from one topic to the next, which makes them very difficult to control and predict. In this time of standardized testing and accountability, many of education's stakeholders want guarantees of success, improvement and progress. This desire to predict, plan and control all professional growth, program implementation and instructional strategies creates a tension between expectations and experience.

Rae refers to the Professional Conversation Group as, "English Teachers Anonymous" (#5: 29) to fellow colleagues in her school. As four people, where three people were barely acquainted with each other, we bonded quickly. Professionally, we valued the opportunity to get to know each other, and we valued "making contact" (Anna #5: 29). The constraints around the design of the research made participating feasible. "When I was setting this up, I picked no more than a 45 minute drive because anything more than that, and people just can't, can't do it" (Susan #5: 30). When considering something like a conversation group for professional development, limiting the stress and time commitment is important or "people aren't going to want to do that if its going to stress them out and tax them more than they already are" (Susan #5: 30).

In the past, senior high ELA teachers of my division created a council where we came together one or two times a year to discuss issues in our subject area. This was very valuable professional development. Originally, this group was

just a loosely knit conversation group without a leader. I served to convene the meetings but only as the contact person to arrange time and place. Central Office supported and assisted the meetings. This was my first local conversation group and it was very effective for supporting both Anna and myself. The timely nature of REC (Regional English Council) also contributed to the implementation of the new program. It became a space for me to share information and insights from the provincial committees with which I was working. We shared units, upcoming professional development, resource selections, and issues. The experience of this council was described for Rae, who was not involved in REC, in the following exchange:

> Erica: And when I first came there seemed to be about once a year a half day meeting that we were able to get together, and we all met, and it really worked well, and everyone brought a little something to share, and, and it was really nice, and that's how I met everybody actually.
>
> Susan: And one time we talked about non-fiction, another time we talked about the issues with plagiarism, resource ordering 'cause we were in the process of putting new curriculum, so they're not necessarily preset agendas, and we, as the senior high English teachers control them more, coming out of the issues that are coming out of our classroom.
>
> Anna: Well, didn't Nola say that you guys were talking about REC at one of your meetings with Jane, or whatever?
>
> Erica: Yeah.
>
> Anna: How you wanted to resurrect that, or whatever, and .....
>
> Anna: And the comment that I made to Nola was that Central Office cannot dictate, then, what we talk about.

Erica: No.

Erica: And that was what the issue, that was one of the issues in September are what, you know, opening day, well, we had to have an agenda, and I, they pretty much ....., well, it doesn't, they take, they've destroyed the whole.

Anna: They did?

Erica: They destroyed it.

Anna: That's right.

Erica: By trying to take control of it because it doesn't work, yeah.

Susan: And when it was just us meeting in Westside, 'cause originally it came out of the fact that we had a sister school about our size, but we never spoke to.

Rae: And yet you're so close to each other.

Anna: Yeah, Susan and I didn't know them. Well, yeah.

Susan: And we were brand new, like second year teachers teaching high school. I, I had been teaching before but not high school, and then, and then we lost all of, all of our experience, so we were just clutch and grab for anybody who knew anything.

Susan: And, you know, we ran into each other at ELAC (English Language Arts Council Conference), got talking and said, well, we always say we're going to do it, and so we picked a date.

Erica: Oh, okay.

Susan: And when we went back we asked, and they [Central Office] said, yes, so like it, it really came from...

Erica: Yeah.

Susan: From us, too… Rae: it has to. [overlaid] (#5: 47-48)

In the spirit of accountability, Central Office wanted more and more control over the content and directions of the meetings. What had started as informal meetings about our subject, but with deep, personal investment and ownership, was stripped away as Central Office started setting agendas and imposing dates and structures. Irwin and Farr (2004) claim that teacher motivation for grass roots projects and shared responsibility dwindles with a loss of control. The ownership of the council was eroded with experiences like the following:

Erica: …I know that last year on the very first day we had, they booked us a REC meeting, well, that was so unsuccessful…

Anna: I never even saw that.

Erica: Well, it was.

Anna: Because I'm sure I didn't go.

Susan: So many of the REC people are connected to AISI.

Anna: Well, yeah, but this.

Erica: Well, and it, and at the beginning of the year is not when you have things to talk about.

Susan: No, that's right. (#5: 46)

Similar to Mills' (2001) lessons, we realize it is important to allow "the focus of meetings to emerge from the teachers' concerns, insights, passions and questions, to theorize from practice, and to promote inquiry as a stance that pervades our classroom practices and curricular conversations" (p. 26). Since conversation evolves out of our practice and is dependant on the local context, it

is difficult to voice possible concerns or ideas out of specific contexts. It is important to ground my professional conversations in the local situation of my present classes. Without knowing my present students' needs, I am only able to speak in generalities. The real solutions, creations, and ideas often arise from a specific context.

We value the opportunity for these professional conversations and would have shared or generated several productive ideas. Brooke, Coyle, and Walden (2005) observe, "while upper levels of the education hierarchy often promote professionalism in 'word,' they often circumvent the process in 'deed,' imposing regulations and mandates that rob teachers of decision making power" (p. 373). Further to 'setting' the meetings, Central Office was perceived as having caused the failure of the council with other interference and removal of teacher ownership. The following exchange has several long pauses identified by … Perhaps the pauses are in response to making political and possibly unpopular statements in a public way.

> Rae: But I mean, if you have to humour them and have an agenda, so you put something on paper, and then you do what you want to do anyway.
>
> Anna: Yeah, yeah, that's true.
>
> Erica: But one of us has to be the one who creates the agenda 'cause when they start creating the agenda, then that's just a nightmare.
>
> Susan: Yeah. And I guess one of us just has to be the person to say, okay, I'll be the chair up front, 'cause before we were trying, we were trying to stay somewhat away from that. I think I organized a lot of the meetings, but it was, it was just to have one contact

person, but we didn't want it to be about one person in charge 'cause I think that irritates people.

Erica: Yeah, 'cause you're just, you're just going to have a good conversation, that's the whole point, not that formality.

Anna: And I, ..., you know, they were making us evaluate at the end....., I didn't want to do that either .....

Erica: Come on. [sarcasm]

Anna: Do evaluate, yeah, we had a good conversation.

Erica: Yeah.

Anna: Five, Five, Five, Five ....., yeah, that's right.

Erica: But the moment Central Office becomes involved in these things it just…

Anna: It does.

Erica: It just falls apart. It's really sad to say.

Anna: And didn't Colin even come to one of those meetings and listen? I'm sure that Colin was there one time.

Susan: Or was it Corrine?

Erica: Corrine was in and out once..... looks, one, one.

Anna: One meeting they came and that really pissed me off, too, 'cause it was like they were spying on us then to make sure we were actually talking about something legitimate.

Susan: Didn't trust. [overlaid]

Erica: Well, come on, we're not going to waste our time. That's right.

Susan: Yeah, that's right. Well, but, we, when, after the plagiarism conversation, and the censorship

conversation that we had, I went back and Colleen ..... and myself and, and you helped develop the APA and the MLA citation systems [student handouts] that we have for our school, and then somehow this then became an issue at the administration, and then they wanted everybody in the division to have copies of this, and, and that's fine.

Rae: And no one forwarded it to Klein. [May 2004 Premier Klein was in the news accused of plagiarizing in a paper submitted to the University of Athabasca]

Susan: Yeah.

Erica: Yeah, exactly.

Susan: So, I mean, that, that, things like that can get done where the whole school, or the whole school system can benefit from it, but they come out of people are passionate about what they're doing, not because somebody told me I have to develop a plagiarism [and referencing handout].

Rae: That's right.

Erica: Yeah.

Rae: And then it becomes homework and you don't want to do it.

Erica: No, that's right.

Susan: No, that takes the fun out of it. (#5: 48-50)

Although Rae was not part of the council, her administrative duties and experience shaped her comments about making the council work while satisfying Central Office's needs for a paper trail of accountability. If we wanted to continue our professional conversation, we would need to make changes to the council while maintaining a sense of ownership. However, at the same time, Central Office needed to acknowledge the professional nature of the group and the value

of professional conversations, realizing we were not going to waste our own time. Pursuing a compromise with Central Office might be a way to sustain the conversations we have commenced through my research. Although my research is finite, the AISI project, which serves as another conversation experience for three of us, will continue for another two years. However, Anna, Erica and myself have all expressed concerns that at the end of the AISI project, the conversations will end. We still have two years remaining with the project but already we are planning ways to continue the conversations after completion. Ideally, returning to REC (Regional English Council) and including junior high people on the council would provide the continuity and vision to continue to engage in reflective practice.

Implications of Conversations

Respecting, supporting and collaborating all evolved through our conversations. Remembering Feldman's (1998, 1999) position of conversation as a research methodology and hermeneutic process illustrates how participants moved between the conversation, their local context, and a more global perspective. Thus "conversation leads to new understanding and new understanding shapes the conversation" (p. 31). This 'vehicle' of supportive community has the potential to reshape practice in interesting and intellectual ways. O'Donnell-Allen (2004) suggests through her teacher research group that refining teaching is a lifetime process accomplished with the help of "supportive, inquisitive colleagues"(p. 67). Learning—whether by student, by teacher or by

both—is a complex enduring process "that deserves sustained time, care, and commitment, and demands questions issuing from actual classrooms and professional development contexts that support teachers' attempts to answer them" (p. 67). Professional development that holds as a central tenant the necessity of conversation creates a support network for implementation changes, improvement initiatives and general growth. Professional conversation is vital for idea development, validation and professional growth.

CHAPTER 8

Final Conversations

Thesis Conversations

In this, a case study of four, rural, senior high ELA teachers with a methodology of conversation and a frame of complexity theory, a central understanding for me is that this complex process of curriculum implementation requires various conversations in the professional lives of teachers in order to reshape practice. It is a process, not a product, and that requires the teacher to become the student of the curriculum.

This thesis is a conversation among myself, my participants, other researchers, and the text itself. Metaphorically, as a student of new curriculum, I have now completed my final project for English Language Arts. Although this project is complete, by no means is the process of learning and teaching a new curriculum complete. Just as we invite our students to engage in conversations that sustain their desire to learn for a lifetime, so is it necessary for teachers to find people, situations, and texts to engage us in conversations of process and change. The conversation must continue.

I had three questions to which I wanted answers. This led to my exploration of conversation as more than the simplistic view many individuals have of 'shop talk'. The research questions are as follows.

1. What are the experiences of rural Senior High English Language Arts teachers in implementing a new Program of Studies?

2. To what extent can professional conversation shape personal understanding of curriculum for English Language Arts teachers working in rural settings?
3. Can complexity theory inform the understanding of Professional Conversation Groups?

A source of research I felt lent itself well to my developing theories is William Doll Jr. Doll (2002) envisions curriculum as five C's: currere, complexity, cosmology, conversation and community. Throughout this research I have attended to three of his five C's in detail. Focusing my attention on his notion of complexity, conversation, and community, weaves together the research questions.

Conversations of Experience and Community

What *are* the experiences of rural Senior High English Language Arts teachers in implementing a new Program of Studies? Question one regarding the experiences of rural ELA teachers' is evident in the conversations and discussions contained in each of the data chapters presented in this thesis. Participant's interactions and relationships with the new curriculum were many and varied. Without entirely summarizing the data chapters, I can say that the relationships included exploring, responding, managing, creating and interacting. The interactions included conversations with the curriculum itself, the students of each class, a series of teachers both in and out of the school and, of course, the individual, to name but a few. Perhaps the tensions, contradictions, insights,

questions and transitions are important reminders of the fluid nature of this process of change. On curriculum Madeleine Grumet (as cited in Davis, 1996) suggests that

> Curriculum is a 'moving form'. That is why we have trouble capturing it, fixing it, in language, lodging it in our matrix. Whether we talk about it as history, as syllabi, as classroom discourse, as intended learning outcomes, or as experience, we are trying to grasp a moving form, to catch it at the moment that it slides from being a figure, the object and goal of action, and collapses into the ground of action. (p. 204)

If curriculum is a 'moving form', than the experience of implementing new curriculum is fluid and emergent.

The experiences of rural ELA teachers implementing new curriculum are complex. The layers of systems and relationships intertwine in unpredictable ways. These events are situated with an individual in a classroom, a series of classrooms, a school, a community, a region and professional community. "As Britzman (1992) notes, (as cited in Beavis, 2001, p. 58) how teachers teach is intimately related to processes of becoming, 'situated in relationship to one's biography, present circumstances, deep commitments, affective investments, social contexts and conflicting discourses'" (p. 8). We, as a community of teachers, are still in the 'process of becoming' with our new ELA curriculum, as we bring our biographies, our passions, our contradictions and ourselves to the conversation.

Rural challenges.

Within this thesis, I suggest that teachers must first become the students of the curriculum they wish to implement. Unfortunately, rural teachers are without

teachers to guide them. Finding communities for support and collaboration makes the journey of change easier.

Rural teachers, in particular, lack the infrastructure that urban centers with department heads, curriculum leaders, and district consultants have for supporting their implementation experiences. While this has the advantage of freedom of choice and action in the classroom, its great disadvantage resides in the lack of easy access to professional conversations. Rural teachers are left to interpret the document on their own unless they actively seek others' interpretations and practices. Inquiring into practice can be challenging when isolated, because there is no one to draw attention to the invisible, to bump ideas together or theorize about possibilities.

In order for teachers to create supportive communities for students in the classroom, they must find them for themselves. How is it possible to create community if one is isolated? Grossman (2001) suggests professional communities allow teachers to "recognize the interrelationship of teacher and student learning and are able to use their own learning as a resource to delve more deeply into issues of student learning, curriculum and teaching" (p. 989).

Serafini (2002), although discussing changes to assessment, presents three very important components necessary for changing classroom practice in general. He cites adequate time, distance or critical perspective, and dialogue or collaboration as key components for perspective and practice changes. I suggest that the experience of my research contributed to four teachers' change process. Firstly, it allowed four teachers to take time within the busy structure of the

school day and year to reflect on and consider their experiences with new curriculum. The open and trusting environment encouraged the participants to share candidly while remaining open to other possibilities.

Conversation and Personal Understanding

To what extent can professional conversation shape personal understanding of curriculum for English Language Arts teachers working in rural settings? Doll (2002) believes "[i]n conversation lie our hopes for both convergence and transformation: We become transformed as our differing views converge on that which is presently beyond us, and the situation itself changes or becomes transformed as we go through the convergence process" (p. 49). Through conversation we come together both to speak and to listen in hopes of transformation. "We fall" into each of our conversations, which contained a "spirit of its own" (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 345). As Clark (2001) suggests, "Good conversation feeds the spirit" (p. 181). Falling into professional conversations about implementation shapes our thoughts, our actions and ideally our practice. It rejuvenates practice, and makes time for thinking and planning. What emerged from the research regarding the experience of rural teachers is the depth to which conversations can influence implementing new curriculum.

Each conversation holds a transformational possibility. During the conversations, there were many instances of discovering what I actually thought or believed at the point of utterance or writing. Professional conversation does shape personal understanding of curriculum, in this way, for English Language

Arts teachers working in rural settings. It is a growing, living, breathing seed that tentatively pushes out, experimenting with expression and reshaping its perspective. It expands possibilities in unexpected, unanticipated and unique ways. Defying the rigid constraints of certainty and control, by its very nature, it resists planning. It is playful and childlike in its understandings. It unfolds and breathes in the surrounding space, transforming the space as it exhales. The seed embeds itself in the moment, absorbing the surrounding sights, sounds, thoughts, and feelings. Ideas play in the breaths of air, the words on a page, the letters on a screen, touching for a moment the glimmer of an idea, only to lose it as it fades away to return in a new form, fused with all that is inhaled and exhaled. Our conversations were an exploration where we transformed our understandings of the program we are still implementing. It provided opportunities for our understandings to become clearer, our choices more conscious, while our beliefs were exposed, considered and reshaped.

In the words of Anna, Rae, and Erica, conversation is: "…the whole basis of it for me" (Anna #5: 28). I relied on it "almost exclusively" (Rae #5: 28), "It saves so much time and so much energy to have a conversation about something and it just sparks ideas" (Erica #5: 33).

Conversations and Complexity

Can complexity theory inform the understanding of Professional Conversation Groups? Within complexity theory "individuals are not the only kind of learner" (Bowsfield et al., 2004, p. 9). Social groups, such as Professional

Conversation Groups, "actively adapt and reorganize themselves in relation to experience or context… without a central organizer" (p. 9). Expanding the collective possibilities of a learning system, such as a professional conversation group, may be prompted by attending to the necessary conditions of internal diversity, redundancy, enabling constraints, neighboring interactions, and decentralized control.

Curriculum is complex; it defies simple order. Therefore, experiences with curriculum cannot be simplified into the Tyler Rationale (Tyler, 1949). Theorists who attend to complexity theory, such as Doll (2002), Capra (1996, 2002) and Johnson (2001), suggest that nature welcomes complexity. Doll (2002) believes, "[i]t is time for curriculum itself to adopt this spirit and embrace, not reject, complexity" (p. 45). He also cautions against the bifurcation of simplicity and complexity, identifying that they are embedded within each other in creative change. One cannot be separated from the other. "The key idea is that nature, life, organization all occur when there is a sufficient but simple level of complex interactions, and that from these complexly simple interactions new and more complex levels of nature, life organization arise" (p. 46). It is these interactions and relationships that create an individual's experience and understanding of curriculum.

Doll's (2002) final C is community, which binds complexity and conversation together. He believes community is a transformational vehicle necessary to transcend us. General Outcome Five with its emphasis on a community of learners is the binding or 'vehicle' that brings each of the other four

outcomes together. Without this sense of community, learning is isolated and limited for both the students and teacher. The relationships, interactions, group dynamics and context of a social system such as a Professional Conversation Group cannot be controlled or predicted, but they will be generative as they adapt and learn from one another. Attending to complexity theory principles in the classroom encourages a fluid, more responsive curriculum to emerge from the situation. Within the Professional Conversation Group structure, attending to complexity allows for the emergence of planning and creating, as seen during the section I entitled the 'War within Ourselves'.

Consequent Conversations

Seeking Conversations

It is important for teachers in rural areas to seek conversations at various stages of a career and for various purposes. Modern technology's multiple forms of communication are one way to reduce isolation. Mitchell (2005), an Alberta teacher, is designing an e-mentorship model for beginning and experienced teachers of ELA in rural settings. Together, both face-to-face and online, participants collaboratively plan curricular experiences, which supports a new teacher, while creating a collaborative journey for both. Access to other possible conversations through technology could include: educational chat rooms, phone calls, list serves, video conferencing, distance learning courses or email.

Further conversations can be found locally, divisionally, provincially and nationally. Local conversations, although they may be limited by a lack of English

Language Arts specialists, can take the form of general professional conversations on issues such as assessment, planning, and technology, to name a few. Forms include reading groups where diverse colleagues share literature or professional reading, collaborative learning groups based on inquiry into practice, grade meetings, or any other reason that serves as a place to begin.

Moving to regional or divisional conversations, it may be possible to acquire a density of voice within a specialty. Committees like the Regional English Council can foster extensive conversations on issues, resources, and implementation. The Comprehension and Communication project, designed to improve reading instruction, united junior and senior high teachers as well as some content area teachers with a common goal. The project, with its sustained nature and supportive structure, awakened the desire to learn in many of its participants. For example, one teacher is now applying for her Masters', two others have become lead teachers for a project on writing and still another has moved into teaching online. It also built relationships that now extend beyond a singular professional development structure to more casual and ongoing connections where conversations about practice occurs in the line-ups for coffee, at other meetings, and in hallways.

Moving further out in the educational structure, professional organizations such as English Language Arts Council, National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Associations are also conversation avenues. Many of these organizations include publications for textual conversations, executives and committee work and conference presentations. Other conversations outside of a

regional area can extend into committee work for curricular development, much like my experience with the Curriculum Review Team and the Program Validation Committee, or government marking sessions such as diploma exam marking in Alberta, which was a staple for Rae.

Missing Conversations

In regard to academic research conversations, there are very few studies currently looking at curriculum change in the specific area of English Language Arts, with the exception of a few studies originating from the Australian context, such as Johnston and McCausland (1999), Beavis (2000), Wyatt-Smith (2000) and Manuel (2002) that examine curriculum change within the subject specialty of English Language Arts. Further, Black's (2005) study of "The Role of the Department Head as a Change Agent in the Implementation of the Newest Alberta English Program of Studies" does focus on ELA curriculum change but it does so from a perspective beyond the classroom teacher's practice. However, most other studies focus on the general nature of change processes outside of a subject specific context. Research in English Language Arts curriculum implementation at the classroom level may be an area for further study.

Further Conversations

While this research examines a broad range of experiences within curriculum implementation, research that delves deeply into specific elements of teacher's implementation experiences such as writing instruction, reading

comprehension instruction, assessment and standardized exams would be informative.

Chapter five entitled *Conversations of Managing Ideas and Information* also opened possibilities for further research. Understanding a teacher's personal philosophies, beliefs and practices in relation to standardized exams undergoing redesign may provide insight to teachers' classroom writing philosophies and practices.

Beginnings and Endings

One final point of interest… The way into my thesis began with a conversation; the way out of my thesis was solved by a conversation with my editor. My editor and dear friend is also the teaching colleague first introduced to you, the reader, in the section 'Learning to Teach: Initial Conversations' as my unofficial mentor.

I had written my conclusion, but was dissatisfied with the structure. I could not face starting again, as both she and I expected I would have to do. Disheartened, I headed for the back yard swing to pout before facing the reality of rewriting. Needing a break, she joined me. Our casual chitchat made its way back to the problem of the conclusion, when suddenly, through our words, a new and far more effective structure emerged that did not mean starting from scratch. In the circular nature of conversation, beginnings and endings blend together.

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APPENDIX A

Initial Private Conversation Questions

These initial conversations were designed to build a personal relationship with each participant while simultaneously acquiring general background information. They were to guide our present conversation, and provide starting points for future conversations, while not to prescribe them.

1. How long have you been teaching ELA?
2. Are you an English major, minor, honors English…? Has this affected your teaching?
3. What is the age range of students you have taught? Approximately how long? Elementary, junior and senior?
4. Have your approaches to ELA instruction differed over time? If so how?
5. Has ELA changed over the course of your career?
6. As a subject, what value would you place on ELA for your students?
7. Why did you become an ELA teacher?
8. How engaged are you with the new SHELA document?
9. What inservicing have you attended for the new program?
10. How comfortable with the new program are you?
11. What do you perceive are significant changes between the old and new program?
12. What are your perceptions of your division's role in new curriculum implementation?